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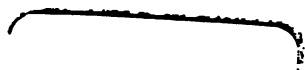
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BEHIND
THE FOOTLIGHTS,
OR
THE STAGE AS I KNEW IT.

By
W.C.DAY.

Illustrated by G.B. Le Fanu



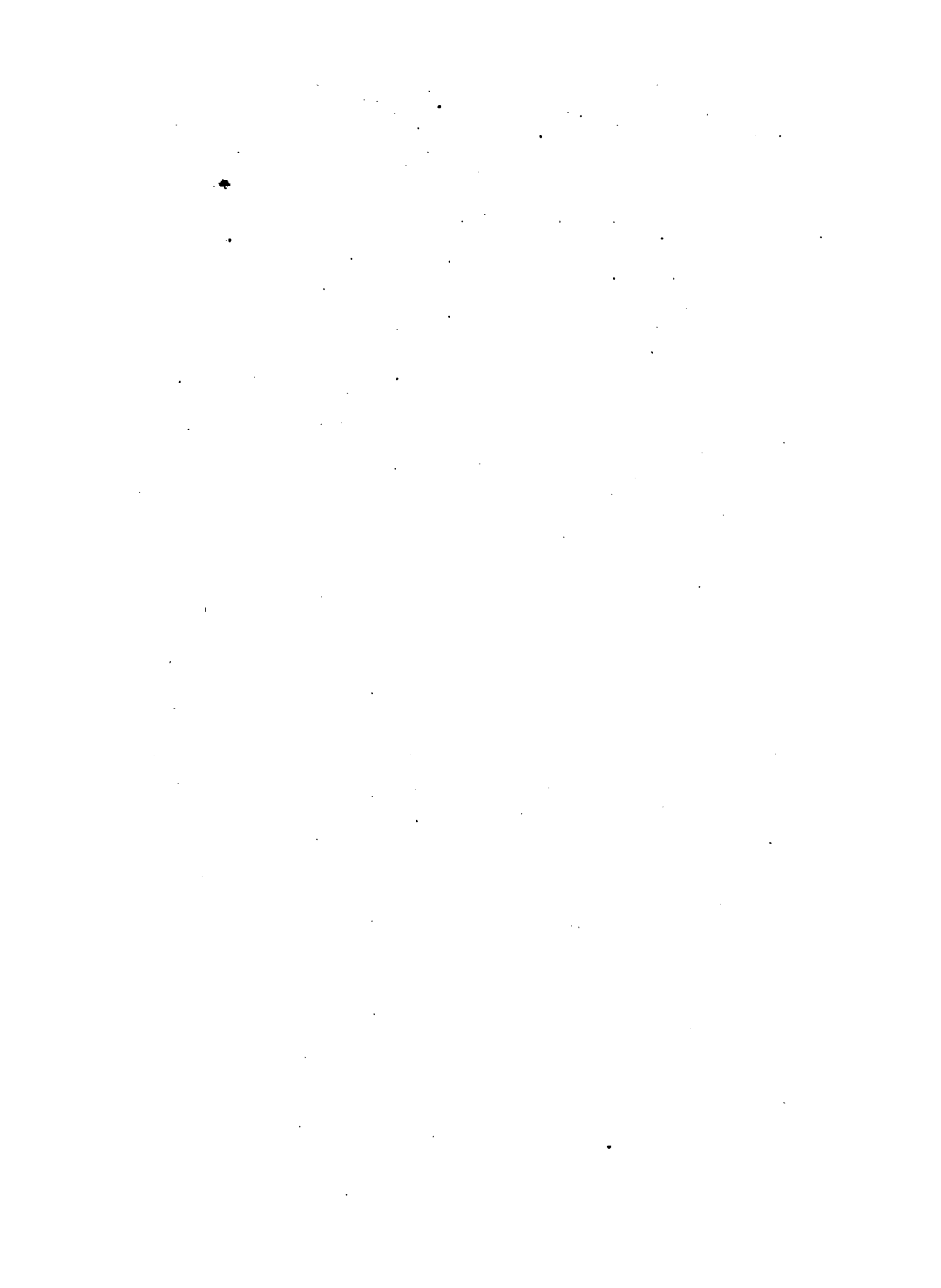




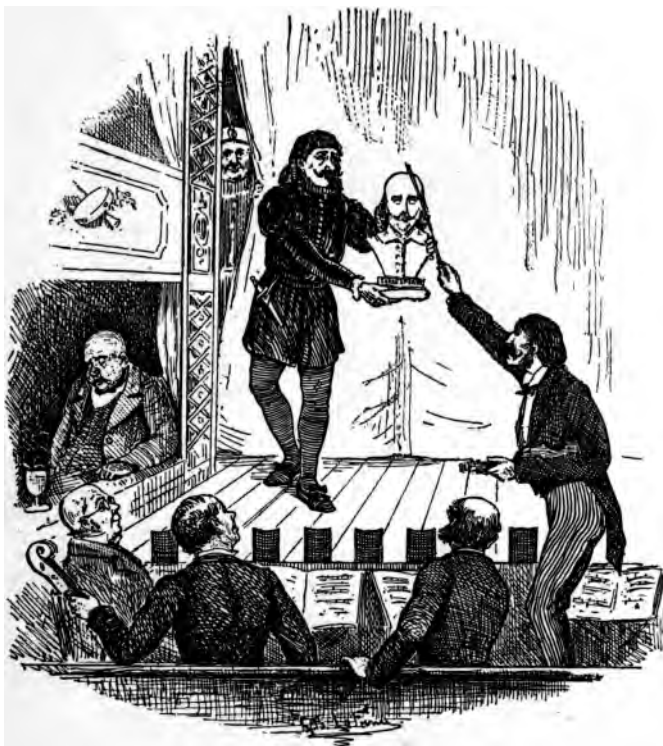
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BEHIND
THE FOOTLIGHTS.







Shakespeare's Last Play—The "call" for the author.

BEHIND THE FOOTLIGHTS;

OR,

THE STAGE AS I KNEW IT.

BY

W. C. DAY.



“ Let me play the Fool ;
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come.”
—*Merchant of Venice.*

Illustrated by G. B. Le Janu.

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INTRODUCTION.

WHEN a tradesman opens a new shop, and is anxious to dispose of his goods, his first act is to issue to his patrons, the public, such a catalogue of his wares as will ensure the commodities being regarded in the most favourable light. He warrants everything. This rule applies with equal force to the *mercantile* professional, be he lawyer, doctor, divine, or simple author or artist. It behoves him to recommend his work by some cunningly-contrived device, and to affix to his nostrum an attractive label, so as to induce the patient to swallow the potion cheerfully. And where, let me ask, can a dealer hit upon, and offer to his customer a more enticing trap-bait than in the innocent and ingenuous title *Truth*? Secure under that ægis, he can draw upon his imagination from St. Paul's to the Antipodes, and set down taradiddle after taradiddle with the impunity of the infallible Pope of Rome. The grocer warrants his roasted coffee free from chicory, and the confiding housewife at once plumps down upon the counter of the tea warehouse one shilling and eightpence, for sixteen ounces of the fifteenpenny mulatto-coloured abomination, with the docility of a lamb. The dairyman pops an additional penny per quart upon his "guaranteed pure milk," and the unsuspecting invalid imbibes the skim-wash with an inward assurance of its bodily nourishment and support. Champagne, bottled on Count Phizzy's estate in the south of France, and bearing that nobleman's heraldic lozenge branded on the cork, commands an extra two guineas per dozen from the amateur

connoisseur at his wine merchant's ; whilst brandy, " neat as imported," and the juice of the juniper berry, stamped by the Boniface's distiller, as positively free from aqueous adulteration, are insisted upon as wholesome and nutritious beverages, by that numerous class of ancient spinster who consider a nightcap of scalding hot alcohol, " at their time of life," as grateful, and, indeed, essential to their health and longevity. In each, and in all of these cases, the assurance of the purveyor who supplies the article is accepted in good faith by the purchaser, and the bare idea of chicanery on his part is scouted as unworthy of his social status. Very well then, the author of these sketches only follows the lead of the counter, and of his brethren of the quill, when he honourably and faithfully assures the reader that the incidents in the following pages are free from adulteration, and literally and absolutely TRUE. Of " My *Début* on the Stage," an actor now living, and not many years since the respected lessee of a Metropolitan popular place of amusement, was the hero, and from his own lips the facts related in the tale were supplied. " A Tragedian's Irish *Début*," and " Coriolanus at the Seaside," owe their existence to the late distinguished tragedian Charles Dillon (to whom the adventures really occurred) and who was wont to narrate them to his intimate friends in his own characteristic and inimitable style. For the rest, the author was a witness of, or has been a participator in, all the scenes described, and has neither added to nor subtracted from the fidelity of the event. He takes this opportunity of acknowledging his indebtedness to his zealous collaborator, Mr. G. B. Le Fanu, whose illustrations have given to his characters a vivid life and reality the pen must have striven in vain to impart.

W. C. DAY.

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BEHIND THE FOOTLIGHTS.



AMATEUR THEATRICALS.



THE facilities which the establishment of numerous institutions, during the last five-and-thirty or forty years, has afforded the metropolitan youth for the enjoyment of his leisure hours, and the exercise of his social proclivity, in whatever direction it may tend, are in nothing more extended than in the well-conducted, spacious, and conveniently situated buildings where the stage-struck amateur of to-day is at liberty to disport himself. The houses devoted to such performances are usually provided with suitable scenery, possess adequate properties, a sufficient number of carpenters and scene-shifters, a tuneful orchestra, and efficient attendance both before and behind the curtain. As a rule, too, the amateur actor of the present age contents himself with the representation of some drama of modern life, in which his everyday habiliments, sitting easily upon him, escape the ridicule that a partially-washed toga and a dirty pair of melted-butter-coloured tights inevitably provoke, when encircling a dumpy Roman, poised on a base of calves anatomically at variance with the classic standard. What a contrast such a stage presents with the amateur Thespian Temple of

my youth, monopolising with a rival establishment in Wilson-street, Gray's Inn-lane, now converted into a parochial school, the nightly exhibitions of the many kindred spirits, who, as frequently as their finances permitted (and, I fear it must be conceded, occasionally a little oftener), gave dramatic entertainments within its dirty and narrow walls.

In the year of grace 1840, the building at the corner of White Hart-street, Catherine-street, Strand, now the publishing office of the *Echo* newspaper, was a private-theatre, rejoicing in the classic nomenclature of Royal Pantheon.

Here on ordinary nights, if not furnished with a ticket of admission by some lady or gentleman engaged in the performance, that privilege was obtainable from the potboy at the "Two Spies" public-house adjoining the theatre. A notification to that effect appearing at the foot of the playbill, announcing the tariff at which it could be procured. Thus armed, and entering through an ordinary street-door in Catherine-street, approached by a couple of stone steps, you proceeded along a narrow, mouldy passage, whose walls had been innocent of paint or whitewash for at least a generation, and the dirt and dinginess of which were illuminated by the spectral light emitted by a one-jet gas-branch at its furthest extremity. This single gaslight did treble duty, as it lit, or was supposed to light, the groping audience along the entrance passage, and up the flight of steep and narrow stairs at the end leading to the auditorium, as well as the little pigeon-hole at the bottom of the staircase, where you handed your admission card to the proprietor's eldest son, receiving in exchange a voucher for the part of the house you were destined to occupy.

Well, you are seated at last, and glance around. The theatre is of the legitimate horseshoe form, and consists of boxes, pit, and gallery, with a private box—much the size and shape of a sentry-box—on either side. The two front rows of the pit have been boarded off to form the orchestra, consisting on ordinary occasions of two violins and a piccolo, but on "grand nights," when *Richard the Third*, *Macbeth*, or *King John* is performed, the exigencies of these

warriors' armies are met by the addition of a fourth musician, who, having thumped a toy-size drum for several minutes, with the resolution of the late Tom Sayers when professionally engaged, effects a hasty exit behind the scenes through a door under the stage, in order to perform on an antiquated cracked cornet à piston the "distant music" that heralds the approach of the contending parties, from a depth of about fourteen feet at the back.

The pit holds about sixty persons, the gallery about forty, whilst, say, threescore more are wedged into the two rows of unstuffed seats forming the boxes, amusing themselves by beating a tattoo, with hands, sticks, or umbrellas, against the red ochre and yellow façade of the "Circle," till the fourth overture has been "executed," and the curtain rung up. Six gas burners, without glasses, shielded from the orchestra by what had once been green tin-shades, form the "float," and two three-branch gaseliers with cracked glass globes, pendent from the tops of the private boxes, assisted by a flame in the centre of the lobby at the back, nearly the length of a greengrocer's light in a market neighbourhood on a Saturday night, complete the entire illuminating power in the audience part of the house. The box audience, that is, the front row—from which bonnets are excluded, in view of the threepenny impost for their care, annexed to the restriction—are shown to their seats by a cadaverous-visaged broken-down-looking man, of some sixty odd years of age, who combines, with the duties of check-taker and box-keeper in front, those of stage footman and assistant dresser behind, for as soon as the front row is tolerably full, he delegates the check-taking office to the tender care of the tawdrily-attired fat old lady attached to the "cloak-room," and hurries behind the scenes, in order to superintend the novice's arrangement of his stage finery, and see that the two supers comprising the opposing "armies" are duly disposed at opposite entrances.

He is habited in a footman's left-off livery suit of faded pea-green, enriched with gilt buttons, a gold-band collar, and a couple of stage epaulettes as shoulder-knots. Fearfully seedy salmon-cotton fleshings do duty for the orthodox white silk stockings; and the "get-up" is

completed by a pair of stage shoes, such as Shylock wears, surmounted with two huge metal buckles considerably tarnished. This apparel not only renders him conspicuous in his capacity of box-keeper, but saves the necessity of change of dress, as well as the time occupied in the process, as he is appropriately attired for his duties behind the scenes, to clear the stage, or carry on the Dutch-metal gilt throne for the monarch of the night. On extreme occasions, when Brutus had to address the mob, or Macbeth insisted on an augmentation of his "forces," a cloak was thrown over his livery suit, and he was thrust on to the stage to furnish the additional contingent. At such times, some portion of the familiar salmon-coloured fleshings, with the tarnished buckles and the Shylock shoes at their extremity, would be plainly perceptible beneath the disguise mantle, and betrayed to the audience the demand upon the resources of the establishment by which such extraneous aid had been obtained.

The progenitors of this lugubrious specimen of the "human form divine," on whose wan and faded-looking countenance, strictly in keeping with his dress, even the frequent humours of an amateur performance could barely conjure up a smile, had transmitted to him the family name of Green, to which his godfathers and godmothers had contributed the baptismal addition of James; but the manager of the Royal Pantheon—than whom a more eccentric presiding genius of a dramatic temple never figured in the archives of stage history—not content with so homely a cognomen, had conferred on him the high-sounding appellation of Fabuletto. This degenerated into "Fab" with the *habitués* of the theatre.

Who that has once exhibited on the boards of the little Catherine-street playhouse, when Benjamin Smythson was the proprietor, can possibly forget him!—the indescribable costume with which he encased his portly figure, his expansive forehead, his frank and somewhat handsome, open countenance, his expressive, laughing eye, his good-humoured, smiling mouth, his vivacious ready reply, and, above all, the round, full, sonorous tone, and the dignity of manner with which he rung out the simplest instruction, or

addressed to you the most commonplace remark. He was *grandiloquent* in all he said or did. A stage king, off the stage! Stately in his step, statuesque in his attitude, authoritative in the very wave of his hand! I can see him now, directing the placing of the single board that formed "the platform" for the appearance of Hamlet's Ghost.

"Fabuletto, let me feel confident the planks are properly secured. I would not have an accident befall Mr. St. Clair for the dignity of the whole body. And Marco" *—(this was addressed to one of his sons, a young man of eighteen or nineteen years of age, who rendered occasional assistance with the scenery)—"may I rely upon you in protecting the extremity of the platform from change of position during the descent of the apparition?"

As the "descent" did not exceed at the furthest two feet six, it would have been matter of small moment, so far as safety of limb was concerned, whether the representative of the elder Hamlet's shade preserved or not his equilibrium on the nine-inch board that formed the terminus of his midnight ramble.

One anecdote will serve to illustrate the felicitous manner, always at his command, that he would adopt to rectify an error or escape from a difficulty, whilst at the same time reconciling the histrionic tyro to the nonplus the necessities of the occasion compelled; and thoroughly satisfying his wish or gratifying his ambition.

The play was *Hamlet*. I should premise that the Pantheon boasted no stock wardrobe; *that* was supplied by one Brice, of Brownlow-street, Drury-lane, at the time referred to the recognised theatrical costumier of the amateur stage. Smythson contracted with Brice to dress each night's performance for a stated sum; this was occasionally augmented, as when a Roman tragedy was attempted, and it became necessary for sundry togas to pay a visit to the laundry, or when a melodrama of the blood-and-thunder school wound up the entertainments, and the band of robbers had to appear in additional numbers, with long cloaks and slouch

* The late Mr. M. N. Smythson, for eighteen years the talented and respected chorus master of the Royal Italian Opera.

hats, and decorated with as many daggers and pistols as the belt of the stripling round whose slender waist it was buckled could reasonably accommodate. But on ordinary occasions the salary of the costumier was a fixed one, and being somewhat "cabined, cribbed, confined," the condition of tunics and trunks, especially of those allotted to the minor characters, was now and then proportionately seedy.

On this occasion a novice, under the euphonious theatrical sobriquet of Walter Melville, smelt the lamps for the first time in the character of Guildenstern. For this privilege his contribution to the evening's expenses amounted to the (to him) munificent sum of seven shillings and sixpence. This amount, by the way, was considerably in excess of that usually expended for indulging in a part of similar importance, but Mr. Melville was a fledgeling, and hence the unaccustomed addition. It was usual with the dresser, when aware that a first appearance was accompanied by an extra outlay of the silver ore, to select a tolerably decent garment for the *débutant*, one boasting at least an average number of spangles or bugles, and not so utterly destitute of hooks and eyes or buttons, as to necessitate the emptying of more than one pincushion in order to ensure its security on the back of the wearer; but in this particular instance the representative of Guildenstern had been thrust into a very old, much-torn velvet shirt, whence the original maroon colour had long since departed, and which appeared to him not remarkably suited to the gallant courtier for whom it had been designed.

His appeal to Fabuletto for a gayer suit having proved unsuccessful, and scarcely determining whether to put up with the one provided, or solicit the Manager's interference for an exchange, he timidly approached that dignitary, and, with a nervous temerity that hardly rendered his complaint audible, contrived to stammer out, "Oh, please, sir, I think Mr. Fabuletto has made a mistake with my dress."

"An error!" exclaimed the Manager, in his loudest, ringing tone—and as he spoke he assumed a look of astonishment, as if mistake, or even inadvertence, was an event unknown within those walls—"an error, Mr. Melville! explain yourself, sir, if you please."

"Why, I play Guildenstern," continued the youth, with fast increasing embarrassment, and he hesitated, as considering in what terms most safely to prefer his request.

"Truly it is so, thou sayest aright, and you will find me at the wing, sir, watching with anxious eye the courtly gait and gallant bearing you will assume, when embodying that distinguished courtier of the Court of Denmark."

"Yes, Mr. Smythson, but I am afraid they haven't given me the proper dress."

"You would not surely imply, sir, that my Prime Minister, whose archæological researches in stage costume are ungrudgingly admitted by the highest authorities, and to whose care I delegate the responsibility of distribution, has inadvertently been guilty of inaccuracy! You enact Guildenstern, is it not so?"

"Y-e-es," stammered out the astonished and terrified lad, "but look at the book, sir, if you please," and he held out with trembling hand a well-thumbed copy of Cumberland's acting edition of the tragedy of *Hamlet*.

"What is this, young gentleman?" inquired Smythson, slowly extending his hand for the book, and glancing at the title-page. "Oh, I perceive, 'the divine emanation of our glorious bard' which we are now about to represent."

"But please to look at the costume, sir; see what the book says is the proper dress for Guildenstern."

"Do thou read, Mr. Melville, the text is illegible to me without extraneous aid, and I have unfortunately left my glasses in the saloon; read thou, and 'with good accent and good discretion.'"

The poor youth took the play-book from his hand, so agitated at his own presumption that he with difficulty held it steady enough to enable him to read, "Guildenstern, Amber ibid."

"But the context, sir; let us have the context, if you please," said the Manager.

Mr. Melville looked up into his face with an expression that could not have been more blank had he been requested to undertake the translation of Thucydides.

"The context in this case will be the preceding charac-

ter," continued Smythson, in explanation—"Rosencrantz Mr. Melville."

"Oh! I see," said the crimson-faced embryo actor, and he proceeded to read, "Rosencrantz—Green velvet jacket, trunks and cloak, trimmed with gold, scarlet silk puffs, white silk hose, shoes and rosettes, black hat and white feathers. Guildenstern—Amber *ibid*."

"The resources of our establishment, Mr. Melville," interrupted the Manager, to whom the true cause of complaint at once became apparent, "although taxed to their utmost limit, must occasionally submit to a trifling deviation from the orthodoxy of the acting copy, but in these extreme exigencies we endeavour to accommodate such discrepancies to the most subordinate rôles. What may be your cause of complaint at the present moment?"

"My dress is the wrong *colour*," hazarded the trembling youth; "this one is crimson, and you see the book says I ought to wear an amber *ibid*."

"Pardon me; did I not understand you to be the representative of Bernardo?"

"No, no; not Bernardo, sir, I play Guildenstern."

"Guildenstern!" echoed the Manager, surveying his victim from head to foot with a curious expression of inquiry, as if endeavouring to clear his memory from some temporary confusion.

"Yes, Guildenstern," was the rejoinder.

"A thousand pardons, my dear sir, *ten* thousand pardons, Mr. Melville; in the excitement of my multifarious duties I had—for the nonce—confounded you with Mr. Walter (*you are Mr. Walter Melville*); I refer to the young gentleman now in the hands of the costumier, who, like yourself, is a *débutant* to-night in the character of Bernardo. I congratulate you, and myself too, sir, for the reputation of our establishment, that the oversight has been detected ere too late for reparation. Fabuletto," he continued, calling at the top of his voice to that functionary, who was busily occupied in trimming a small oil lamp placed behind the paper moon to illuminate "The Platform before the Castle at Elsinore"—"Proceed without delay to my study, where in the bottom drawer of the large *escritoire* you will find a

pair of *amber*-coloured pantaloons—*Guildenstern's pantaloons*!—those are for this young gentleman; go, bring them hither and with speed, Fabuletto, for the overture is rung in."

Fabuletto returned in a few minutes, with a huge pair of faded yellow satin breeches, lent to Smythson some few years previously by an old provincial actor, for whose benefit he had performed Lord Lumbercourt, in *The Man of the World*, at the little theatre in Tottenham Street, then known as the "Queen's."

"There, sir," said the portly Manager, as soon as Mr. Melville's diminutive person had been secreted in the cumbersome habiliment, "you are now habited in the amber *ibid*. It appears to have been constructed for a figure of somewhat more heroic model, but as the Pantheon wardrobe does not boast an extensive selection of amber *ibid* costumes, we must contrive to adapt its capacity to your, at present, scarcely developed anatomy. 'To be thus is nothing,'" he proceeded, at the same time taking in a tuck of about eighteen inches, so as to accommodate its width to the young gentleman's girth, "but to be safely thus," he added, thrusting an enormous blanket-pin through the gamboge continuations, and so securing them to the old velvet jacket as to prevent them dropping off, "'to be safely thus.' There, sir, in the matter of costume you are now complete, and permit me to add, correct. Mr. Strickland, the perquier, in the adjoining apartment, will apply the necessary carmine, and you are then prepared for what I hope will eventuate in a most triumphant *début*. Farewell, sir, and do not forget that the eyes of Europe are upon you!"

The last words were accompanied by a dignified wave of the hand in the direction of the dark and narrow staircase leading from the dressing-room to the stage.

With the management of his theatre, Benjamin Smythson combined the business of theatrical agent, his office being the large room on the first floor facing the street (used as a green-room on nights of performance), and this occupation he supplemented with that of teacher of elocution, mainly directed to youthful aspirants for fame on the boards of his own theatre. He was, however, no empiric

professor of the art, having been a provincial actor of some repute for many years, and well recognised as a competent exponent of the leading characters in the old standard comedies. He had also, as a youth, played with John Kemble in his starring engagements, and would frequently relate amusing anecdotes of that marvellous tragedian Edmund Kean, with whom he had on many occasions acted in the provinces some years later in life. He displayed great sincerity of manner when imparting instruction to a pupil, as well as a natural adroitness in inducing the theatrical tyro to accept his services for a short course of lessons ; nor less an adept was he in bestowing praise or distributing flattery on the histrionic efforts of his patrons, invariably contriving to mete it out, in quantity and in quality, precisely suited to the credulity of the recipient.

"I have come to you, Smythson," said a conceited young coxcomb of about twenty, to him, one evening, as he swaggered into the Pantheon saloon, assuming an air of superiority over those there assembled, to most of whom he was an absolute stranger,—“I've come to you to see if you can put me up for Claude Melnotte next Thursday. I've had a row at Pym's" (Pym's was the rival amateur establishment in Wilson-street, referred to in the early part of this narrative), “and I mean to act *here* in future—that is, if you can give us good parts at low figures. I fancy you've seen me play, for a fellow told me you was at Pym's the other night when I did Othello.”

"I assuredly had the gratification of witnessing some portion of your representation, but I was unfortunately obliged to depart ere its termination, having an engagement of importance at my own domicile."

"Well, what did you think of it, eh? All my friends say it was stunning."

"I perceive your friends are enthusiastic in their appreciation of the dramatic art, Mr. ———,—I beg your pardon, but I have not the felicity of knowing your *nom de théâtre*."

"Who?"

"I mean your *name*—the cognomen you adopt on the stage," said the Manager.

"Oh! Wellington Moore."

"Thank you, Mr. Moore; your friends but do you justice; they are no incompetent judges of histrionic merit. I must confess I was very favourably impressed with the portion of your Othello I witnessed. Your picturesque costume, and the similitude of your figure, in *height*, to the late Edmund Kean (of whom you are scarcely old enough to retain a lucid remembrance), brought vividly to my mind for an instant a vision of that gigantic genius."

"You don't mean to say that?" ejaculated the already-trapped new comer, who inwardly recorded a vow from that moment never to set foot on any stage but that of the Royal Pantheon.

"I will not so far expose myself, sir, to the imputation of flattery as to assert that I pursued the comparison between Mr. Kean and yourself, in your relative embodiments of the Venetian Moor, through *all* the varied metaphysical ramifications of the character, but I certainly may commit myself without reservation to the remark that the upper register of your voice forcibly recalled to my remembrance the *harsher* notes of that gentleman's intonation."

Beneath the stage of the Pantheon was a room some twenty-five feet square, designated the "saloon"; and it was here the ladies and gentlemen comprising the general *dramatis personæ* of Smythson's theatre were accustomed to assemble on such evenings as the house was closed, to arrange forthcoming performances, obtain representatives for the various characters, and discourse generally of theatrical matters.

When an amateur had decided on taking a "night" ("benefit" it was sometimes called, but this was a fearful misnomer)—the expenses of which, inclusive of lighting, band, dresses, printing, &c., averaged from six to eight pounds, according to the dramas selected, and the consequent contingent extra properties or scenery—he affixed on the green baize notice-board suspended over the fireplace a placard to that effect, with the names of the pieces decided on, and a list of the characters comprised therein. Against each part appeared the amount required from the actor for its assumption, and the number of tickets to be placed at his disposal as an equivalent, generally (at the prices fixed

for admission) about three times the amount, if not the *value*, of the sum paid. These tickets the actors were supposed to re-sell to their friends, and so recoup themselves for their outlay, and obtain the amusement gratuitously; though, in the majority of cases, this mode of reimbursement was, like Antonio's "means," entirely in *supposition*.

As the assumption of a character was thus left absolutely at the mercy of any aspirant whose pocket was equal to its importance, it may readily be predicted the parts were not always filled by the most competent representatives; though it is only just to add, that, for the most part, a fair amount of discretion was exercised in the selection, as few but the very vain or very youthful ventured to face the ridicule inseparable from early efforts in leading parts, until they had gained at least some little experience.

Funny scenes, however, have been enacted on the Pantheon stage; and an Othello dressed *à la* Kean, with black bandy legs, a cock-eyed Macbeth, a stuttering Romeo, and a *one-armed Sir Giles Overreach*, are amongst my reminiscences of strange sights.

On the other hand, setting aside the drawbacks of a limited stage, with scenery and properties not *always* historically correct, I have seen many a performance on those boards that would not have disgraced a regular metropolitan theatre; whilst among the celebrities of the Thespian art whose names have long been household words in theatrical annals, occur to me those of Creswick, Henry Marston, Howe, Leigh Murray, Jemmy Rogers, J. Kinloch, Nye Chart, &c., all of whom made their first attempts at this dramatic nursery.

At that day, the taste for the legitimate and poetic drama, cultivated by Macready's memorable lesseeship and management of the National Theatres, pervaded not only the general playgoing public, but diffused its influence almost universally through the amateur acting world. Hence the *pièce de résistance* at the Pantheon Theatre was commonly a five-act tragedy, or standard comedy of the old school, supplemented by a farce or petit drama, as a wind-up to the entertainment. Burlesque in 1840 was in a very debilitated state of health, *Bombastes Furioso* and *Tom*

Thumb being the most popular and staple dishes of that kind of fare.

Benjamin Smythson died in September, 1841, and shortly afterwards the lease of the property was purchased by a Mr. Christie; but, unaided by the tact and experience of the former proprietor, his lesseeship did not prove remunerative, and after about eighteen months' tenancy he abandoned the speculation, and the Royal Pantheon, as a theatre, ceased to be.

It is the fashion to ridicule amateur theatricals, and to associate with such representations ridicule, if not contempt. That such censure is often merited is past denial; on the other hand, it must be conceded that the amateur stage has been the arena that first fostered and encouraged the early efforts of many of our greatest actors, to the exercise of whose subsequent talents we are indebted for many an hour of elevated delight and intellectual enjoyment. Mental diversion is as essential to youth as physical recreation; and surely time spent in the study of human nature, its passions and emotions; "the putting in action all the springs and impulses which make up this, our mortal being," so as to fitly embody, and faithfully present them on the stage, is infinitely better employed than in the perusal of trashy, sensational literature, or lackadaisical novels, destitute alike of diction or probability. "To hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to Nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure," has been laid down, by the world's philosopher, as the purpose of playing; and few will be disposed to deny the existence, in the study of high-class dramatic literature, of an ennobling, an elevating, and a refining influence.



A TRAGEDIAN'S IRISH DÉBUT.

—:O:—

“Theatre Royal, Ballyrooney,

“Sunday Night.

“MY DEAR FRIEND,—Your fame has reached Ballyrooney; your triumphs, in all the great provincial towns of your native land, have been wafted across the sea, and are welcomed in Co. Tipperary with the enthusiasm that belongs to the Sister Isle. But no theatrical success can be complete till indorsed with the favourable verdict of an Irish audience; that is the stamp that converts the actor's reputation into standard metal, and gives it a welcome currency throughout the civilized world. Ballyrooney boasts a stage trodden by Kean, the Kembles, and the mighty Siddons, and it's their mantle that's now floating over my footlights to descend on the shoulders of rising genius. The opportunity is a golden one, and, as I hear you are shortly to make your *début* in the Saxon Metropolis, I tender it you with all the ardour of a brother artist and the sincerity of a true Irishman. The proclamation of peace—the result of our glorious conquests in the Crimea—is to be celebrated in this town to-morrow week, when all the surrounding country will be *en fête*. The Lord Lieutenant comes over from Dublin to witness the rejoicings, and my old friend Phelim O'Downam has enormous interest with him, and will secure a ‘bespeak’ for the opening night. I need not tell you the patronage of our aristocracy follows as a matter of course. Don't hesitate a moment; I understand you're an enterprising man, and an El Dorado lies at your feet. You shall have the theatre for

the week for a paltry fifty pounds, and I leave to the generosity of your nature a parting gift as we shake hands upon leavetaking. Send me twenty pounds as deposit by return of post, and a list of your characters for the five nights. The opening part we must reserve for selection by His Excellency. Phelim will drop him a line as soon as yours reaches me.

"Faithfully yours,

"TERENCE DOHERTY. "

"To Cyrus Dissborn, Esq."

It was late in the spring of 1856, when Mr. Cyrus Dissborn, then the lessee and leading tragedian of the Theatre Royal, in a celebrated Yorkshire town on the northern circuit, received the foregoing epistle. His fame in prominent Shakespearian characters had long been firmly established in the provinces, and, having extended to the metropolis, negotiations were then pending with the proprietor of a popular West-end house for his appearance on its boards in the approaching autumn. He read the letter over several times at his breakfast-table, digesting its contents with his tea and toast. The "business" at his own theatre had been but indifferent lately, the Tykes having seen *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Shylock*, and *Othello* till they were as familiar with their principal scenes as the actors themselves, and he had been for some time debating in his mind what fresh kind of theatrical pabulum he could offer to his patrons that would whet anew their appetites, and secure him the novelty of a good first price. His determination was taken; he would close with the offer of Terence Doherty, and give the Lord Lieutenant and the Bally-roonians a taste of his quality.

Cyrus Dissborn owned an impulsive nature, and a resolution once made was on the instant acted on. He despatched by that night's post a list of the characters he had decided on, full instructions as to their immediate publicity, and, most important of all, both to Terence and himself, the required deposit in the shape of a twenty pound note. Being announced to perform every night of the week on

his own stage, it would be Sunday morning before he and his company could set out for the Promised Land, and as the distance they had to travel by land and sea was but little short of three hundred miles, but brief time must elapse between the hour of their arrival at Ballyrooney and the ringing up of the curtain before the deputy monarch of the Emerald Isle.

We will not pause to inquire into our tragedian's vision of the interior of the theatre on this particular night. It was the "Midsummer Night's Dream" of Thespian fame, with the character of the ass omitted. All the fairies were there, exercising their most potent spells. Titania, the Queen, Puck, Peasblossom, Cobweb, and Moth—all had instructions to

"Be kind and courteous to this gentleman,
Hop in his walks, and gambol in his eyes."

In his dream, Ireland was—for that week at least—nothing less than a dramatic Eden, and the stage of the little playhouse the mythological gardens of the Hesperides, where grew but golden fruit. He had but to reach forth his hand, and pluck. There was no dragon to guard the treasure. The gaslights, in his imagination, seemed to burn more brilliant there than in his Yorkshire theatre; the gilding looked fresher; nay, he could almost fancy he smelt the new paint with which the auditorium had been embellished for the occasion. The orchestra appeared quite as extensive as at the London Opera House, and the dulcet strains of Hibernia's symbolic harp floated in his ears in tuneful melody. And then the audience!—the anxious, the enthusiastic, the admiring crowd! The pit was one sea of heads; the gallery a mass of human beings so compressed together that Turkey figs, flattened in deal boxes for exportation, seemed in comparison positively isolated. And lastly—if indeed a fancy so exuberantly inventive could have an ending—the boxes! row behind row of feminine loveliness, and masculine intelligence and power; a vista of wealth, beauty, and intellect, with the Lord Lieutenant seated in its centre with his Lady in their chairs of State.

Never did Time pass slower with the schoolboy who calculates on his slate, in place of the sum allotted to him,

the number of hours he must pore over his books ere the Christmas holidays arrive, than with Cyrus Dissborn did the week preceding the Sabbath morning that he and his little company were to set out. His nightly duties that, at other times, he regarded as pleasures, so enamoured was he of his profession, now seemed "double, double toil and trouble," and the very sun itself appeared to be suffering from some atmospheric influence that retarded the rapidity of its diurnal course. Sunday morning came at last, and brought with it a dismal, cloudy sky that threatened sloppy pavements to the Yorkshire town before night-fall. There was a heaviness in the air, a leaden mist hung over the houses and settled in the streets, and where an opening in the thoroughfare enabled the eye to penetrate into the distant country, the prospect became even more gloomy and depressing than in the town. It was one of those mornings that invite to home comforts, and make one shudder at the notion of quitting the fireside. But to the eye of Cyrus there never had been a brighter dawn; the buoyancy of his spirits saw nothing but sunshine, the very temper of his mind was waterproof. All the company had risen at an early hour to take advantage of the Parliamentary train to Liverpool, whence they were to take ship to the Irish coast. Economy in the selection of his *troupe*, though not naturally a component part of our hero's nature, was rendered compulsory by the state of his exchequer. He, therefore, limited it to the heavy man, juvenile lead, first old man, walking gentleman, and a couple of utility gents—disciples of Thespis not unfrequently supplied from the amateur stage by unsuccessful aspirants to parts of a higher range—who abandon happy homes and loving faces, to experience too late the fallacy of their own ambition, and the insincerity of friends' flattery. Two of the opposite sex completed the party.

Arrived at Liverpool, the railway carriage was exchanged for the vessel's deck, and the basket luggage stored thereon, covered with a tarpaulin to further protect it from the boisterous weather. Our voyagers sought the shelter of the forecabin for similar reason, as the rain the early morning had foreshadowed, had for several hours been steadily

descending, and promised a constancy proverbially disconnected with the weathercock. The utility lady was in a fearful state of mind ; it was her *début* on the boards of a ship, and the novelty of the surrounding scene, viewed as it was, under the disadvantages of conflicting elements and approaching night, struck terror to her heart, culminating as she regarded the man at the helm. This individual resolved himself in her imagination into a sort of marine Ixion, his punishment made even more terrible than his namesake's from the aqueous element where he was forced to undergo it. Wandering "aft" to inspect him more narrowly, her terrors were confirmed, and her pity for his fate augmented, by the imposition of perpetual silence enjoined on the spectator. "What a dreadful fate must be his!" she thought, as she read, with a trepidation it was impossible to repress, old Neptune's sentence for his crimes emblazoned in gold letters on the instrument of torture to which his hands were tethered, "You are forbidden to speak to the man at the wheel."

The forecabin of a passenger ship between England and Ireland afforded, at the time of this narrative, but indifferent accommodation for the traveller's repose. Night came on, and the monarchs of the stage found themselves but ill attended on shipboard ; the "caitiffs" and "sirrahs" accustomed to bow down with obsequious salaams on the boards of the Yorkshire Theatre, at the mere intimation by the oligarch of the scene, that it was desirable for them to drain the poisoned goblet, or immolate themselves by any kindred dramatic specific, were no longer there to support the Prince's drooping head, or hold the cracked yellow earthenware basin to the mouth of the sickening Emperor.

The steward, a thick-set, stalwart Irishman, whose ruddy countenance denoted absolute contempt for the entire Pharmacopœia, occasionally peeped in, and suggested another rummer of hot brandy and water as the most effectual palliative he was acquainted with for "any koind o' nauche-a," and one of the sailors as regularly followed him five minutes afterwards, armed with the orthodox mop, to clear away what he knew, by about that time, would be the effects of the steward's prescription.

But it is high time for our little party to leave the ship and step on Paddy's soil. Let us then leave to the reader's conception the miseries and distresses of that memorable night, and the laggard pace at which each dreary hour passed in the atmosphere of a crowded cabin, polluted by the fume of wet clothes and the steamy odour of the labouring vessel, on whose dismal and deserted deck the raindrops continued to patter with oppressive monotony.

The afternoon of Monday was far advanced when the voyagers landed at a small seaport town on the western Irish coast, from whence to Ballyrooney was a good two hours' ride by rail. The train was timed to start for that place as soon as possible after the arrival of the steamer, and no time was lost by Mr. Dissborn and his companions in procuring their tickets, and seeing the wickerwork abomination securely deposited in the luggage van. As the train moved out of the station, and the effects of the vessel's motion gradually subsided, the spirits of the party slowly revived, and conversation that had lain on the shelf for many hours past began to assert itself as the train sped on.

Ballyrooney railway station was reached at last, the hour five o'clock, and the rain still pouring down with pitiless persistency. To convey all the baggage to the Theatre, situated in a remote part of the town, in the two rickety jaunting cars plying for hire at the station gates, was absolutely out of the question, so, consigning the arrangement of their transport to the joint abilities of the "utility man" and the "responsible gentleman," our tragedian, with the two ladies and the "juvenile lead," mounted one of the cars, and desired the driver to proceed with all possible haste to their destination. As they rattled through the streets their eyes searched in vain the walls and shop-windows for posters and announce bills of the night's programme. Mr. Dissborn's vivid imagination had pictured his name displayed in gigantic characters in every possible hue of the rainbow, wherever "coigne of vantage" presented itself on the route, surmounted with some hieroglyphical device, emblematic of the Lord Lieutenant's patronage and presence, and could hardly succeed in convincing himself that their absence was not assignable to the neglect of the

bill-sticker, or the effect of continual rain on the hoarding and walls.

The driver reined in his steed at the front entrance of a large whitewashed building, resembling a colossal barn; one side of which abutted on a blacksmith's shop, whence proceeded an offensive odour of the stable, and wherein a bevy of sturdy smiths—seven or eight in number—was standing round a forge, whilst a couple more were engaged in shoeing a grey cart-horse by the blazing light it afforded. A dirty alley, three or four feet in width, bordered the Theatre—for such it was—on the other side, and led down to the stage and gallery doors; these were situated side by side, and flanked by a dustheap and a dilapidated hoarding, inscribed, in white letters, "Beware of the water-spout." There was scarcely time for recovery from the bewilderment this prospect occasioned, when, in response to the car-driver's knocking with his fist on the little green door, designated "Box Entrance," the said door swung back on its rusty hinges, and two persons presented themselves in the entrance; they were the Manager and his friend and factotum, Mr. Phelim O'Downam.

"Mr. Dissborn, I belave," said the former gentleman, extending his hand as he spoke. "I'm deloighted to welcome ye to Erin's Isle." The tragedian, having acknowledged the compliment and concluded the hand-shaking, descended from the car, and assisted the ladies to alight.

"Allow me to present to ye my friend, Mr. Phelim O'Downam," he proceeded, and Phelim, advancing for the introduction, took Mr. Dissborn's right hand between both of his own, and worked it up and down like a pump-handle.

Phelim was a short, stout man, with very broad shoulders, very coarse hands, and feet large enough for a giant. He was habited in a faded, mulberry colour velveteen shooting jacket, and an emerald green plush waistcoat with enormous pearl buttons, his extremities being encased in a pair of brown leggings considerably the worse for wear. His *tout ensemble* seemed a cross between an under gamekeeper and the individual who performs on the Pandean pipes with Punch and Judy. The party, passing through the little

green door, were ushered into the box lobby, the further end having been partitioned off as refreshment saloon and cloak-room. Here the mask was lifted, and Mr. Dissborn given to understand that the Lord Lieutenant would not be there *that* night. The crestfallen Thespian received the intelligence with a shrug that shook all his fortitude into his boots.

"May we expect him to-morrow night?" he inquired nervously, already anticipating the negative of the Manager's headshake.

"I'm afraid to tell ye it's past hopin' for," rejoined that functionary; "he's returnin' to Dooblin by special train in the mornin'. Phelim wrote to him last week. I wrote to him, but a devil a line could we git in reply; in fact, I dun know what they're doin' wid him in Dooblin. Phelim called on him this mornin' at the 'Protector's Head'—the hotel in the town where he's stayin'—but he wouldn't listen to him at all, and, to be candid wid ye, he was jist beginnin' to be rude a bit, when Phelim thought it prudent to retoire."

"Shall we have anything of a house to-night?" pursued poor Dissborn; "I hope that——"

"I don't fancy it'll be *crowded* to-noight," interrupted Mr. Doherty; "but Ballyrooney is an iligant place—an aristocratic place, and I've had the boxes made deeper, and jist a shade aisier in the sates. All you've got to do, Mr. Dissborn, is to hit yer audience; only hit the people to-noight, and I give ye my honour you'll have the fashionables in the mornin' surroundin' the box office in swarms."

With this assurance the company separated, the tragedian and his friends being shown into an apartment at the back of the stage some eight feet square, euphonised as the "Green-room," to partake of some refreshment before preparing for the labours of the evening. It was long past seven o'clock, the hour announced for the rising of the curtain, when Mr. Cyrus Dissborn, dressed as Claude Melnotte, stood silent, dejected, and alone, at the prompt side first entrance of the Theatre Royal, Ballyrooney. The music had just been rung in, and two violinists in very seedy garb were engaged in tuning their instruments, whilst the cornet

and trombone players, completing the orchestra, divided their attention alternately between freeing those brazen tubes from accumulated expectoration, and trimming the half-dozen old-fashioned oil-lamps that constituted the "float." The scraping on the catgut sounded "scissors" in poor Cyrus's ears, and his vision of Irish harmony vanished like a ghost.

The national jig (called by courtesy the "overture") ceased, and up went the green baize for *The Lady of Lyons*. The third scene came—interior of Melnotte's cottage—and on to the stage, rifle in hand, bounded the youthful Claude.

"Give me joy, dear mother, I have won the prize!"

His eyes glanced quickly at the front of the house, only to realise the sad satire he had uttered. A party of four young gentlemen were assembled in a knot at one side of the boxes, intent on the purchase of oranges and cakes from a dirty old woman with a basket slung over her carrot-coloured arm, and a tattered "belcher" handkerchief thrown over her expansive shoulders. Two ladies and a child (Mrs. Phelim O'Downam and the proprietor's wife and daughter) were ostentatiously posted in the centre, and completed the "dress circle" attendance, while ten or a dozen lads in shirt-sleeves, and a few factory girls, destitute of cap or bonnet, made up the census of the Olympia above it.

"Bravo!" ejaculated the Manager from the pit, clapping his hands vehemently, and beating an accompaniment with his feet on the floor.

"Bravo!" roared Phelim, who was seated next his employer, and added a rider to the latter's exordium by rapping on the empty bench beside him with a bludgeon the thickness of a hop-pole.

Mr. Dissborn went through his part with the best power he could command under such disparaging circumstances, and scarcely had the curtain reached the stage when the two Irishmen were standing by his side.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Doherty, dealing him a thwack on the back like a blow from a sledge-hammer, "hurrah, me boy! faith, you've hit 'em—it's all right; you've hit the Ballyrooney boys, it's as right as a trivet."

Phelim expressed his congratulations in equally demonstrative terms, but substituted a glass of reeking poteen for the thwack on the back of his master.

It will readily be imagined that, after a day of such fatigue and excitement, our hero was not dilatory in seeking his repose at his inn; but "sleep, that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care," is coy of her entrance when the mind is overcharged, and the miserable prospect his speculation promised kept poor Dissborn's eyes open and his thoughts engaged through many long and anxious hours. He was awakened from a sound sleep about eight in the morning by a rapping at the door, and an announcement from the waiter that two gentlemen downstairs were desirous to see him. The waiter had disobeyed his injunction of the previous night as to disturbance, the visitors, he explained, being so importunate, so, sending word he would be with them in half an hour, he hastily dressed, and descended to the coffee-room. Having warmly exchanged greetings with his friends of the overnight, Mr. Terence Doherty thus propounded the day's programme:—

"Energy, me dear Mr. Dissborn!" exclaimed the Manager, "is the one essential ingreijent to success in loife; it's the only way in fact to get at the people of Ballyrooney. Phelim and I have been thinking this mather over, and we've diskivered a way to serve ye. Be quick with yer coffee, man; put on your hat, and come along wid me and Phelim. Nothin's to be done without energy, sir."

"That's throe for ye," acquiesced Phelim; "energy, as they say on the racecoorse's, the kerrect card."

They all three proceeded to a large draper's store in the principal street of the town, where the tragedian was formally introduced to about five-and-twenty shop assistants as a "moighty janius," and requested to write orders for their admission in the evening in order that they might verify his assertion. This manner of securing a "house" was repeated at the grocer's, butcher's, baker's, and tradespeople generally, till it gradually dawned on Mr. Dissborn's mind as forming a part of Terence Doherty's system of pro-

viding economically for the domestic *ménage*. The day's tour was completed, and Mr. Dissborn, having despatched a hasty meal at his hotel, proceeded to the theatre to prepare for his duties. He was met at the stage-door by a rough-looking individual in a fustian suit, of whose face and figure he fancied he had some misty recollection.

"Shure, now," said the stranger, proffering a filthy black hand as he spoke, "and isn't it the moighty new English player I'd be spakin' to?"

Conceiving himself the party alluded to, the "moighty player" thrust both his hands into his pockets, and nodded a haughty assent—

"An' what may be the play to-noight?" he inquired.

"*Richelieu*," was the rejoinder.

"Dun know 'im," said the stranger. "Was he an Orange-man, or one of yer Saxon rulers?"

The tragedian drew himself up to his extremest height, and pursed his lips into a contemptuous smile.

"No mather for that," said the stranger. "Anyhow, me and the boys 'll come and see him to-noight."

Mr. Dissborn's features were slowly relaxing at the contemplation of the promised patronage, when he continued—

"Walk yerself into my smithy now, and jist write out an order for a dozen of us; stay, make it thirteen by the way; my foreman's youngest boy's jist got over the masles, and he's promised him a threat to the play."

In an instant the truth flashed across the actor's mind; the speaker was the blacksmith he had noticed on his arrival, shoeing the grey cart horse at the blazing forge next door. Scorn, contempt, disgust, rage—the whole catalogue of "Le Brun's passions" was depicted in his countenance in a phalanx; but as he turned haughtily away and entered the stage-door, he seemed to read in the blacksmith's confronting look and insolent snap of the fingers, a determination of purpose that puzzled and unnerved him.

Some hour and a half might have elapsed, and Richelieu and the Capuchin Joseph were debating in the second act how best to frustrate the Orleans conspiracy that threatened the Cardinal's life.

"Bah!" exclaimed Richelieu, "the statues of our stately policy are sculptured by the chisel—not the axe!"

The axe! clink—clink—clink, a sharp ringing sound, as of metallic substances striking against each other, grated on his ear. Clink—clink—clink—again! it grew louder and louder, and appeared to issue from the thin wall on the smithy side of the Theatre. What could it be? He could no longer doubt—it must be, it *was* the blacksmith and his thirteen "boys" hammering on their anvils in token of defiance.

The scene ended, the distracted Cardinal rushed to Phelim, whom he saw standing at the wing, entreating him to run next door and put an end to the horrid din.

"And is it an end to it you'd be puttin'?" demanded Phelim. "Shure now, ye might as well thry to blow down a lighthouse wid the bellows. If ye want 'em to leave off *work*, faith, and ye'll have to let 'em *come in* to the theayther." The blacksmith had conquered.

A rehearsal of *Hamlet* was called for eleven o'clock the next morning, and shortly after the Manager and his friend Phelim presented themselves on the stage.

"Phelim and I have been thinkin' this mather over again," said the former, addressing Mr. Dissborn, "and we've hit on a brouht idea. It's of no use standin' still, Mr. Dissborn; energy, me boy—energy is the only way to hit the Bally-roonians."

"Thru for ye again," chimed in his companion, "Energy's my sentiment all over the world."

Mr. Doherty proceeded to explain the philosopher's stone these Irish Siamese twins had discovered. The Mayor of Ballyrooney had just received the honour of knighthood at the hands of the Lord Lieutenant, and if they could manage to obtain his patronage for one night, the misfortunes of the speculation must inevitably be retrieved. To Phelim was confided the task of immediately waiting upon the Mayor's son, and soliciting his interest with his father in the matter. The young man readily undertook the commission; being a bit of a scapegrace, he outran the constable at times, and on such occasions was in the habit of applying to Doherty for pecuniary assistance; in truth,

the latter was at this moment the holder of his acceptance for twenty-five pounds, the interest, at the rate of sixty per cent., for the fourth renewal, being due and payable at the end of the week. Whether this fact stimulated his exertion is neither here nor there. The commission was of a somewhat delicate nature, the Mayor, a sexagenarian, having but a few months prior taken to his heart and hearth, as wife and Mayoress, an attractive young lady of barely twenty summers, for whom, it was whispered about, his offspring entertained a *penchant* not strictly *en règle* for a step-son. He succeeded—personally or through the lady's influence matters little—in obtaining the object of his errand, and hastened back to the theatre to acquaint the Manager with his success, his father and the Mayoress having been graciously pleased to appoint Saturday (the last night of Dissborn's appearance) for their patronage and presence *en grand tenue*.

The play selected for the occasion was *Much Ado About Nothing*, and everybody concerned set to work in earnest to realise the title. The orchestra was to be increased by a drummer, capable of utilising his talent on a triangle when the drumsticks were out of use; a new scene, expressly for Benedick to make love in, was to be painted; a couple of lanterns for the watchmen attending Dogberry and Verges, were to be furnished by the blacksmith next door; and, above all, to make the old Mayor as comfortable, and also as imposing, as possible, a portion of the seats in the centre of the dress-circle would be taken down, and replaced by two civic stage chairs, furbished up with Dutch metal and red cotton velvet. The Mayor's son suggested, as a suitable expression of respect to his father's new dignity, and an acceptable compliment to the *amour propre* of his young mother-in-law as Mayoress, the erection of a banner over this mimic throne, with some heraldic device thereon, and the scene-painter was then and there invested with *carte blanche* to carry out the design in an appropriate manner.

The eventful evening arrived; each of the band had permission to pass two friends into the pit; the blacksmith's free list—in virtue of the loan of the lanterns—had been doubled; the linendraper's assistants had compromised



The Mayor of Ballyrooney's "Bespeak."

with Doherty for the accommodation of a score of their acquaintance at seven o'clock upon second price terms, and the baker's man had debited himself with three shillings and sixpence, for his own and half-a-dozen friends' admission to the gallery, pledging his word of honour to Phelim to cancel the liability on Saturday night. Added to all these was the rush at the doors; the news of the Mayor of Ballyrooney being on view in his robe of office, in company with his young wife, had aroused curiosity among "the boys," who assembled in the centre of the gallery in strong force, the very place where the object they had in view, or rather wished to have in view, was physically impossible.

Benedick had looked to this important night to recoup the losses of preceding ones, and lighter of heart than he had felt for some days, bounded on the stage when he received his cue with the lightness of a young gazelle.

"Bravo!" shouted the Manager in stentorian voice from his usual place in the pit.

"Bravo!" roared Phelim, who sat close in attendance, and whack, whack, whack, went the bludgeon on the empty bench at his side. Terence put a sudden end to the tattoo by snatching the shillalagh from his subordinate's hand, and waving it fiercely over his head; then, jumping on the seat, he looked up at the gallery, and called on "the boys" to give the "mighty actor a cheer-e."

Hearty as were the Yorkshire shouts so familiar to the tragedian's ears, they sounded but as love whispers compared to the wild hurrah the Patlanders sent forth in response to the Manager's appeal. But there was little charm in their ring, for Benedick's thoughts were elsewhere, and his mind's eye saw but the two empty state chairs where he had looked for the attraction of the night. What *could* be the matter? At rehearsal that morning the Mayor's son had pledged him his honour his father and mother-in-law would infallibly be in their places at seven o'clock to the minute. It was now past eight, and the throne was tenantless. What *could* it be? The act over, he was striding dejectedly to his dressing-room, where his progress was arrested by Phelim O'Downam.

"Och!" said that gentleman, "I'm afeared there's somethin' wrong wid the Mayor; the young Mayor's in the green-room waitin' to spake to ye."

To rush there and fling open the door were the work of an instant. Stretched on one of the benches skirting that place of retirement, with both his legs poised on the table before him, lay the hopeful son and heir of the Chief Magistrate of Ballyrooney. He was strongly under the influence of the national beverage, and balanced in one corner of his mouth a dirty dhudeen, filled with the rankest description of Irish "bird's-eye."

"Faith, I've bad news for ye, Mr. What's yer Name," he hiccoughed out, removing the pipe from his mouth. "Father can't come to-noight."

"Death and damnation!" ejaculated the tragedian, applying his hands to his forehead *à la* Othello in the third act.

"Och! take it aisy, man; dun put yerself out in the laist. The fact is there was a bit of a shindy t'other noight at the Red Cow—that's father's whiskey-shop in Rowdy Street—and one of the boys got an ugly rap wid a shillalagh. He doid next day, and afther the inquest, the spalpeens have bin wakin' him this afthernoon at our house. I left father an hour ago as dhrunk as a fiddler, and the Mayoress bathin' his face wid a towel. I knew it was no use yer waitin' for 'em to-noight, so I jist ran here to tell ye, *that ye shouldn't feel disappointed.*"

The morning dawned—a bright and cheery Sabbath morning—and the church bells were ringing merrily for service, as our little party, having reached the coast, steamed from the pierhead for English land, thoroughly disgusted with their tour, and with a TRAGEDIAN'S IRISH DÉBUT.



CORIOLANUS AT THE SEASIDE.

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THE vitality of the poetic drama, however its vigour may occasionally languish on the metropolitan stage, is pretty generally acknowledged by provincial managers; and as soon as a country audience evinces signs of indifference to the more flimsy kind of fare provided for its amusement, the *entrepreneur* looks, with a tolerable degree of certainty, to the inexhaustible safe anchorage of Shakespeare's Bay. Still, continuous repetition, even of the most sublime language, palls the mental faculties, and falls flatly upon the ear; and the veriest enthusiast of the "legitimate" may witness *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III.*, and *Macbeth*, till, unlike the last-named chieftain, he is forced to cry, "Hold, enough!" and to sigh for "fresh woods and pastures new."

The production of Roman plays makes such heavy demands on the resources of minor establishments, in the way of scenery, wardrobe, and supernumeraries, that their representation is rarely attempted on provincial stages; and hence it occurred to Mr. Harry Primus, a celebrated tragedian of some twenty years ago, that a revival of one of these classical dramas, at the little town of Roughley, in Lancashire, might, apart from the interest attaching to its story, prove a source of remuneration for a few nights, from the sheer novelty of such kind of entertainment.

Primus may be said to have been well-nigh born on the stage, for his father, from his earliest childhood, was manager of an extensive Northern circuit, on whose various boards periodically appeared all the great tragic stars of the day; and thus, from his tenth year, when he

first smelt the lamps, as Albert to the William Tell of Macready, he imbibed an almost fanatical love of the classic drama, which an ardent poetical imagination and quick perception, combined with a mind of no ordinary vigour, and the personal advantages of a naturally clear and musical voice and good presence, assisted to foster, and ultimately established him as indisputably one of the first tragedians of his time.

With a mind thus constituted, and of an impulsive and enthusiastic nature, it may readily be conceived Harry Primus did not stop to inquire if it were possible to drill the forces at his command into anything like competent representatives of noble Romans, or whether the inhabitants of a North Lancashire town were compounded of sufficiently ductile material to receive the impression he contemplated; enough for him that he was the possessor of a large quantity of stage paraphernalia employed in Roman plays, all thoroughly orthodox, and in capital working condition. The large lozenge-shaped shields carried by the warlike supers retained their original forms, and were but very slightly battered; the tinfoil blades of the broadswords shone with nearly their pristine brightness; the fasces borne before the Brummagem consuls were precisely the same bundle of brown rolling-pins they originally were; and the S.P.Q.R.'s, forming the centre of the triumphal standards, as well as the eagles which surmounted them, were as nearly redolent of Dutch-metal as when first turned out of the theatrical *atelier* by the hands of the Drury Lane property-man. So far all was *couleur de rose*. The London costumier was confiding, and the necessary number of togas having returned from the wash-tub, the helmets having been reburnished, and the sandals supervised by the dramatic cordwainer, all was pronounced ready for the venture; and one broiling hot Saturday afternoon, in June, 186—, the following week being Whitsuntide—Mr. Harry Primus and his wife, accompanied by his entire *dramatis personæ*, arrived, by parliamentary train, at the little watering-place to which we have alluded.

Roughley is a small unimportant town on the North Lancashire coast, its bold and rugged shore reflecting not

inaply the manners of its native population ; and, indeed, the visitors resorting there in festive seasons cannot be accused of excess of refinement, for, sooth to say, the bent of their minds inclines pretty much to the local tastes, and by far the larger majority would experience more satisfaction in witnessing an exhibition of the rougher kind of athletic sports, than in sitting in a heated theatre on a baking hot summer evening, listening to the blank verse of a ponderous five-act play.

But the enthusiastic Shakespearian actor saw, with excited vision, an equally enthusiastic audience ; to his ardent imagination the idea of apathy to the heroic addresses of Coriolanus, or want of sympathy with his haughty invectives against democratic rule, or his ill-concealed hatred of

“ The common cry of curs ! whose breath he hates
As reek o’ the rotten fens,”

could not exist even among the coarsest and most untutored of Lancastrian auditors ; and he regarded the pecuniary result of his enterprise with but little anxiety, as he surveyed the many enormous coloured posters with which his “ agent in advance ” had plastered every available hoarding in and about the town, announcing “ a grand revival, for three nights only, of Shakespeare’s historical tragedy of *Coriolanus*, with entirely new scenery, dresses, and appointments.”

The duties of the “ agent in advance,” in addition to billing the walls, and procuring the display in various public-house windows of a streaming playbill (embellished with a large wood-cut of a Roman warrior, sword and shield in hand, in the attitude of the bronze statue of Achilles at the entrance of Hyde Park), comprised conveyance of the wardrobe and properties to the theatre ; the selection of lodgings for the manager and his lady, and furnishment of the larder for the three days’ consumption ; valetting Mr. Primus for his morning labours, and dressing the same gentleman for the stage at night ; after which he might be discovered in Act I. in “ The Streets of Rome,” declaring to his fellow-citizens that “ Caius Marcius was chief enemy to the people ; ” subsequently recognised “ before Corioli ” as the foremost standard-bearer, ready to sacrifice his last

ruddy drop in supporting the cause of the individual he had half an hour before been denouncing ; and finally, in Act V., having withdrawn his allegiance from Coriolanus, and transferred his services to his enemy Aufidius, he turned up in "A Public Place at Antium," as the leading conspirator against his quondam master, anxiously awaiting his present employer's cue of "Insolent villain !" to exclaim, in his most demonstrative manner, "Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill him !" and lunge an unmistakable property dagger half a foot or so behind the armour of the doomed one, by which theatrical strategy, and strictly

"With the whiff and wind of his fell sword
The unnerved Roman falls !"

as does the curtain on the tragedy of *Coriolanus*, and the exertions of the "agent in advance" for that night, so far as his duties on the stage are concerned.

William, for such was the homely baptismal appendage to which this all-round gentleman laid claim, had made choice of lodgings for Mr. Primus in a part of the town as contiguous to the theatre as possible ; but in his zeal to save his master unnecessary exercise, he had entirely overlooked the circumstance of the erection of an immense canvas circus within thirty yards of the front of the house, and the existence, within a similar distance in its rear, of extensive public gardens, whose gaieties were in full swing about a couple of hours after midnight ; for at the time of our narrative it was not considered necessary for the well-being of society to attempt to suppress immorality, or enforce decent conduct by Act of Parliament, and the hour when revellers at holiday seasons chose to determine their orgies was entirely dependent on their own inclinations, or the capability of longer maintaining a position which the late Miss Ada Menken, as Mazeppa, was accustomed to describe, whilst standing in the limelight on Astley's stage, with the shield-arm extended at full length, for the better protection and display of her figure, and the right one grasping a glittering blade pointed towards the chandelier,

as

"The godlike attitude of freedom and of man !"

Besides the attractions referred to there were, in close proximity to Mr. Primus's apartments, drinking and refreshment booths, and marquees for the patrons of the merry dance, steam roundabouts in one perpetual and giddy whirl, swings in incessant restless motion, dizzying the eye and dazing the brain, exhibitions of dwarfs and giants, spectral skeletons and obese monstrosities of humanity; freaks of Nature in the animal kingdom to amaze the eye and puzzle the comprehension—sheep that at their decease could supply the butcher with four legs and a couple of shoulders; pigs boldly challenging comparison with double-headed Janus; a menagerie, whose contents, assuming the veracity of the proprietor, were a living reflex of the original Noah's Ark, with a very extensive modern appendix; stalls for the disposal of gilt gingerbread, ginger-beer, and "toffy;" vendors of every conceivable mosaic ornament for the adornment of the softer sex, and purveyors of all imaginable condiments for the support and delectation of the rougher one; not to mention a sparring booth, for the practice and display of the art of self-defence, outside of which a robust professor of that noble science—(with a flat, repulsive, grog-pimpled and small-pock-marked face, from whose centre protruded an unnaturally wide-nostrilled and unmistakably broken proboscis, forming a limited verandah to a mouth the width of a bull-dog's, and from either side of whose head projected a lappet of crimson-coloured shapeless flesh, with a deep indentation in the centre, serving for the conveyance of sound, and approaching in size to the ear of a King Charles's spaniel)—outside which booth, I say, this interesting specimen of the human form divine occupied himself, during the greater part of the day, in issuing invitations to the uninitiated passer-by to "have on the mittens" just for five minutes with his professional colleague on the other side of the canvas, who would pledge himself to do his utmost, in that limited space of time, to assimilate the face of his antagonist to that of the speaker.

To give due publicity to these various allurements, the hoarsest and the loudest lungs, the most deafening speaking trumpets, the noisiest drums, the heaviest clanging gongs,

and the shrillest of feminine show-folk voices—if it be permissible to apply that substantive to such stentorian organs of respiration—were employed the livelong day, so that it is easy to conceive our tragedian, on arriving at his new domicile, was not over favourably impressed with the selected locality, and began seriously to revolve in his mind the possibility of getting through his work under such distressing drawbacks. First, there was his own part to read up, for he had not played Coriolanus for several years, and was anything but firm in the text; then there were the various scenes to cut, and adapt the characters to the capacities of their representatives, the prompt-book to prepare, the plot of the scenery to draw out, and a variety of other studious matter to consider and execute; and all this had to be accomplished within forty-eight hours, including the intervention of Sunday, when the theatre, as a matter of necessity, would be closed to him.

It was past seven o'clock on this memorable Saturday night, and our tragedian and his wife were seated at tea in their new apartments, with William in attendance awaiting instructions, when a significant shake of Mr. Primus's head, in response to his better-half's suggestion whether it would not be advisable, even at this advanced hour, to send forth the agent in search of more secluded quarters, determined that proposition conclusively, and the entrance at the same instant of the landlady, bearing a relay of bread and butter in one hand, and an old cracked earthenware basin filled with periwinkles in the other, changed the current of his reflection, and caused him to raise his eyes and regard the new-comer.

Miss Jane Pickett, for so was the landlady called, was a dapper little spinster of some sixty odd years, but as lively in her movements, and as vivacious in her speech, as a woman of half her age. Her height did not exceed a yard and a half, and her bulk was on a proportionately diminutive scale; but her frame was nattily and compactly knit, and she delighted in assuring everyone that, in the early part of the century, she had always been considered as possessing "a very sweet temper," and was spoken of as a "*neat and pretty little figure.*" She had a wide and

uncommonly lofty forehead, that the absence of much eyebrow served to increase, and which shone with a polished brightness that might have stared old Sol full in the face without so much as a blink. It may appear a little paradoxical to say that though her eyes were indefinite in colour (resembling most a gooseberry when its bright green hue is slowly merging into ripeness) they had a lively merry twinkle; but a close observer might occasionally discern 'neath their sparkle a lurking furtive glance, disproving the axiom that the eyes are, upon *all* occasions, the mirror of the mind. Her dearest friends have been known to remark a decided change in the colour of her nose during the last twenty years, which was then suspiciously ruddy at the tip, and various causes have been suggested by them as explanatory of the metamorphosis; but I believe the real secret to be discoverable in a small vial, intended only to ornament her dressing-table, but which, through lapse of memory, has now and then been visible on the sitting-room mantelpiece, containing a white liquid with a heavy powdered sediment, disguised with a label, "Lotion for chilblains, for external use only."

In disposition sprightly and gay, and in domestic tittle-tattle animated and energetic, Miss Pickett was utterly incapable of concentrating her ideas on any one particular subject, however commonplace or simple its nature; and she would dart off at a tangent into matter entirely foreign to the theme, accompanying the digression with an amount of pantomimic action that caused her arms to fly about like those of an old-fashioned semaphore, and her head to waggle backwards and forwards as if afflicted with chronic paralysis. This was more than usually the case when anyone praised her excellent health, or commented on her constitutional appetite, and would become ludicrously extravagant in her endeavour to combat a *badinage* that suggested hidden attachment to alcohol, or hinted a suspicion whether the gill of boiling-hot water she nightly conveyed to her bedchamber was, as she invariably declared it to be, really for the purpose of washing her hands.

Such, then, was our hero's landlady, and his introduction

to her was at the moment she entered the room with the bread and butter and winkles as described.

"Good evening, sir," she began, accompanying the salutation with one of those old-fashioned buckram inclinations of the head, taught by preceptors to adults, under the title of "deportment." "I hope you like your apartments. I don't know, madam," she continued, with a smirk, setting the winkles on the table, and plucking a hair-pin from her coiffure for their extraction, "whether your good gentleman will condescend to a homely relish; but our little town is celebrated for its crustacea."

Miss Pickett, whose father, to use her own words, was a "bibliopolist," revelled in long words, and never missed an opportunity of introducing one of rare or obsolete use, acquired in her youthful and more prosperous days.

"I am very partial to wink—to shell-fish," replied Mr. Primus gallantly, with difficulty repressing a titter at the landlady's pomposity.

As the tragedian and his wife discussed their repast, Miss Pickett rattled off, with marvellous volubility, a laconic history of the town and its allurements, enlarging on the encouragement accorded by the surrounding gentry to intellectual dramatic entertainments, and magnifying the curiosity which such a novelty as *Coriolanus* could not fail to excite among the humbler classes; and with such persistency and tact did the little woman pursue her subject, that the actor rose from his meal to proceed to rehearsal, perfectly elated with the prophesied success, and assured within himself that the rival attractions of Roughley Fair, and the baking-hot Whitsuntide weather combined, would have no more effect on the attendance at *his* theatre than a passing April shower could exercise on the back of a water-fowl.

Having ordered boiled tripe and onions for supper at twelve o'clock—for our hero was somewhat Bohemian in his tastes, and scouted the notion of stated *seasons* for certain dishes—Mr. and Mrs. Primus set off to the theatre for a night rehearsal. Here they found surrounding the stage-door their own little company, and a party of Lancashire boors, whom the "*agent in advance*" had induced, by offers of increased

remuneration and unlimited beer, to forego their Whitsun festivities, and appear on the stage as classic warriors and representatives of Roman rabble. For the embodiment of the latter characters but little tuition was needed; for certainly Nature had been eminently successful, in the sample before us, in producing some of the coarsest and most uncivilized specimens of humanity that ever disgraced the theatrical forum, to give their sweet voices for the election of a consul, or yell out, "Hoo! hoo!" at his expulsion from the Capitol. Indeed, the directions of Coriolanus,

"Bid them wash their faces
And keep their teeth clean,"

might, with great propriety, have been applied to the whole crew.

All the *corps dramatique* being now assembled on the stage, a candle was lighted, and placed on a rickety deal table close to the "float," and Mr. Wing, stage-manager and prompter, book in hand, took his seat thereat, in an old state armchair, which did duty at night for a monarch's coronation or a cottager's repose, as occasion required, and the rehearsal commenced.

"What, be we to change t' clothes at noight?" demanded the roughest and dirtiest of the Lancashire gang, selected to form one of the mutinous citizens in the opening scene. This was spoken with as much disgust of tone and manner as if he had been urged to the commission of some revolting barbarity.

"So, oi am to be soger, eh?" exclaimed another, who had been told off as a lictor. "Dang it, oi like t' army; oi run awa' t' list when oi was lad; but oi warn't 'igh enuf' 'cept for drummer, an' oi hates music."

"Silence there, you supers!" thundered Mr. Wing, "and clear the stage. Now, then, you first citizen, lead on your mob."

But why attempt description of a rehearsal in the theatre of a small provincial town? What reader is not familiar with its difficulties and distresses, its mishaps, its shortcomings, its makeshifts, its emergencies, and its deceptions? Who does not know the dodges the country manager must resort to, in

order to make his slender company of a dozen perform the duties of a score? Who has not beheld a three-legged stool exalted into the dignity of a ducal chair for the Doge of Venice, or peeped into the modern whitewashed flower-pot that at night represented the classic urn in which Virginia's ashes were contained? Who does not remember the occasion when the necessities of the wardrobe-keeper have compelled Macbeth to dispense with his tartan, or made it compulsory for his representative to address eight *imaginary* royal spectres off the third entrance, for mere lack of regal robes wherein to envelop them? Which of us has not heard his Grace the Duke of Gloster improvise a line or two to visionary bearers of King Henry's corpse, ordering them to keep *back* whilst he is wooing the Lady Anne, for no other reason than that the property-man is destitute of a coffin in which to enclose the remains of the deceased, and the "unmannered dog," whom he should command to "advance his halberd higher than his breast," happens at that moment to be absent from his post, having been sent over the way to the public-house to fetch a pint of "stout-and-bitter" for the refreshment of the scion of the royal house of York, at the termination of the second act? The fair Ophelia has been buried *off* the stage for want of a trap-door through which to pass her bier to its final resting-place; and when the stage has boasted this necessary convenience, the leaves of a decayed cabbage have frequently supplied the "sweets to the sweet," which the Queen of Denmark has scattered in her grave; and the "virgin crants" and "maiden strewnments," to whose distribution the churlish priest so unfeelingly objects, are often nothing more than delusive tributes to her memory, as (the action of the lady's arm in casting them into the chasm being all that is visible to the audience) the portly figure and canonicals of the officiating clergyman conceal the supposed distributor and her empty basket from view, till the fiery Laertes, like another Marcus Curtius, rushes to the rescue, and, by leaping into the unfinished mausoleum, contrives to distract the attention, and leave undiscovered by the audience the imposition so unblushingly put upon them.

Well, the rehearsal of *Coriolanus* was pretty much after this fashion. The language which Shakespeare fairly distributed between Titus Lartius and Cominius was monopolised by the latter, as the company could only afford one Roman general to oppose the Volcians instead of a couple; by the same nice exigency which compels "needs must" when his Satanic Majesty assumes "the ribbons," the tribunes of the people were compressed into one representative, to wit, Junius Brutus, though, considering these advocates of the "great unwashed" as a body corporate, there was little room for complaint in the present case, as the individual to whom their interests were confided shook the weighing-machine at the Roughley Station at sixteen stone four, and was, besides, possessed of a pair of arms and a breadth of shoulder that apparently rendered it dangerous ground to attempt to gainsay his dictum, and thoroughly justified his arrogating to himself the choleric invectives assigned by the author to his colleague, as well as his assumption of the first citizen's privilege in ordering Coriolanus to "the steep Tarpeian rock" (a sentence, by the way, which he ultimately took upon himself to commute to banishment for life from the city of Rome); winding up his multifarious labours by appropriating the two final lines of the third act (by rights the property of the leading citizen), wherein he expresses his intention to see the deposed consul safe out at the gates, and invokes, by way of finale, the blessing of the Gods on himself and his imaginary assistants, a benediction to which he was decidedly entitled for the heroic manner in which he had sustained the characters of half-a-dozen people.

Numerous were the shifts of this kind to which Mr. Wing was reduced to render intelligible the text of the play with his limited forces, nor was his ingenuity taxed to a less degree in matters of scenery and properties; but long experience under similar circumstances had matured his natural tact, so that the rehearsal came to an end, if not with positive success, at least with fair promise of getting through the tragedy *somehow*, with the aid of further practice on the ensuing Monday morning.

It was the supernumeraries—the Lancashire contingent—that caused him the greatest trouble and anxiety; their utter ignorance of all matters theatrical, and natural brutish stolidity, made their zeal difficult of restraint when expelling Coriolanus from Rome, and was very nearly converting the mimic combat between the opposing armies into one of stern reality and a trial of strength. Indeed, it appeared to the entire gang matter of astonishment that the various clubs, staves, and weapons of attack served out to the representatives of “the mob” should be frantically brandished on so many occasions, with cries of mutiny and discontent, without so much as a blow being struck; and one old fellow in particular, a burly, thick-set man, with a hard-featured, forbidding countenance, who had kept his fists tightly clenched all the evening, and his left foot advanced in a semi-pugilistic attitude, as if awaiting the opportunity for a “scrimmage,” thought he perceived his chance at last, when, at the termination of Brutus’s speech, inciting the citizens to repair to the Capitol, the stage-manager told him in an authoritative tone, and with some asperity of manner, “to go to L.,” and it was only by the prompt intervention of Mr. Primus, in explaining that the supposed anathema was simply a stage direction for him to cross over to the left, that his ferocity was at length appeased, and his equanimity restored for the conclusion of the scene by a liberal gratuity for beer.

Another weighty difficulty presented itself in the band. The occurrence of Roughley Fair in the Whitsun Week had been overlooked both by lessee and manager, and they found to their consternation that every available musician in the town had been snapped up by some rival establishment, with the exception of a spare-built, weazen-faced old foreigner, apparently affected with palsy, who, attired in a threadbare coat and down-at-heel carpet slippers, with difficulty opened the door of the wretched ramshackle hovel to which Mr. Wing had been directed, and announced himself as the Herr Schloz, whose name, written in a school-boy’s hand on a piece of dirty cardboard, with “professor of music” underneath it, was fastened by four rusty nails to *the door*, on the spot usually occupied by the knocker. His

engagement was Hobson's choice ; there was

"Nothing lived 'twixt him and silence."

so, he having made a clean breast of it, by the admission that drums and trumpets being out of the question, "flourishes" and "martial music" must be dispensed with, it was agreed that he should read the tragedy through on Sunday, and adapt such airs and instruments to the various situations as he and his three assistants, who were to comprise the orchestra, could contrive to execute.

The clock of Roughley parish church had just sounded midnight when the rehearsal concluded, and Mr. Primus, having locked up the stage-door, and bade a hasty "good-night" to his company, linked his wife's arm in his own, and hastened home to their lodgings. Miss Pickett was in attendance, and the tripe and onions and a foaming pewter being soon placed on the table, and as quickly disposed of, the fussy little landlady proceeded to clear the cloth, and, producing a bottle of "Old Tom," which the "agent in advance" had provided, suggested the necessity of "just a snifter" to settle the onions.

"I am recommended a thimbleful after supper by the faculty," she said, tapping her chest rapidly with her closed hand, as if to drive away the approaching indigestion, "and I really consider a little stimulant as a nightcap essential to people advancing in years."

The tragedian smiled acquiescence in the sentiment, and invited the landlady to join him in a social glass.

Under its cheering influence Miss Pickett soon became very loquacious, and unrolled her budget of dramatic reminiscences. These were neither very extensive nor particularly lucid, being chiefly confined to a eulogy on the glitter of the elder Kean's knife when drawn by him as Shylock across the stage, and a lively description of a huge tombstone that Charles Young, as Rienzi, dragged to the footlights, and apostrophised to some treasonous citizens with a view of inciting them to rebellion. These early recollections were supplemented with a recent love episode in her own life, by which it appeared she was within an ace of becoming the wife of an old actor in her advancing years ; but some slight difference of opinion arising between her

and the swain, as to the subsequent proprietorship of a couple of tumble-down cottages in the Walworth-road, the affair was delayed, and the engagement ultimately adjourned *sine die*.

Sunday had passed; the holy day was enrolled in the archives of old Time, and a glorious Whit Monday dawned on Roughley. The sun rose resplendently, and the briny ocean sparkled in his beams, and danced with the gaiety of life and youth. As the waves rolled over the pebbly beach they gave forth the murmurs of their sport, growing louder and louder in approaching the shore, as though the very waters caught the hilarity of the season, and were wishful to mingle in its boisterous mirth. The holiday folk, in their gayest and best apparel, poured into the town by quick succeeding trains, all hastening merrily along the High-street and making their way to the seaside. On the beach are assembled a bevy of huge, sun-tanned, web-footed fellows, in coarse fustian trousers and thick dark-blue guernsey shirts, the same garments they don in the bleakest winter or the hottest summer's day, shouting out to the gathering throng the enticements of their almost native element. The proprietors of swings, Aunt Sallys, and long plate-iron tubes, designated by their owners "shooting-galleries," where the highest prize is a few mouldy nuts and the reputation of having gained a "bull's-eye," are driving a roaring trade, whilst the counter attractions of the circus and the menagerie, the giants, the skeletons, and the modern Daniel Lamberts, not forgetting the sparring-booth, each enlist their fair quota of supporters, and help to swell the ceaseless din of the fair. The amusements of each succeeding hour are but a repetition of the last, and seven o'clock, the hour for opening, arrives, and still the revellers make no sign around the theatre's doors.

"This way for th' muse-um!" roared out the lessee of a sugarloaf-shaped marquee, rapping with a cane an old board suspended over the entrance, whereon was displayed, in every variety of coloured ochre, a heterogeneous collection of reptiles, birds, and fishes that must have puzzled the first naturalist in Christendom to classify or describe.

"Which is the way to the play-house?" inquired an old

lady, whose curiosity had been excited by the woodcut of the Roman warrior at the head of the playbill. "I wants to see *Krilanis*."

"No sich booth in the fair, marm," answered the proprietor of the museum; "this 'ere's the shop for 'igh hart. If yer wants t' encouridge natif talen', ourn's the crib."

The doors of the theatre were at last opened, and the tragedy began. Herr Schloz had not attended the morning rehearsal. The fact is, he had been engaged all day in looking up his three instrumentalists, and perfecting them as much as possible in their evening work. He had read through the play furnished him by Mr. Wing on the Saturday night, and selected three popular melodies as appropriate to the scenes and situations where he proposed to introduce them. So, having given our tragedian, whilst dressing, an assurance "that he would find all right," Mr. Harry Primus walked on to the stage as Caius Marcius, with no more idea of the musical *mélange* in store for him, than the animal representing the Dog of Montargis possesses of the geographical position of the Forest of Bondy.

Excepting that one of the Lancashire gang composing "the mob" was recognised by a chum in the gallery and saluted as "Bill," all went fairly well till Marcius's triumphal entry into Rome, which was the scene Herr Schloz had fixed upon for the display of his minstrelsy. Imagine the astonishment of the noble victor when, in place of the martial strains that should herald the approach of the procession, the first sound that caught his ears was the familiar air of "When Johnny comes marching home." Never were lines more appropriate than those he delivered when the music ceased :—

"May these same instruments which you profane
Never sound more!"

The play went on, and the procession went off, standard-bearers, lictors, and mob in strange confusion; a running commentary being indulged in by the audience during their exit, principally in allusion to the legs of the supers.

variously referred to as "shanks," and "mill-posts," "pins," "spindles," "wackers," and "stumps;" indeed, the chaffy banter, which seems the peculiar prerogative of stage armies, was distributed all round with blameless impartiality. But the *chef d'orchestre* felt *his* success was assured, and awaited with inward satisfaction his second opportunity. This occurred at the end of the third act, where Coriolanus is banished from the city.

Primus gave the celebrated speech, "You common cry of curs," with his accustomed fire; and conscious of his own power and the impressiveness of the situation, he drew himself up to his full height for his exit with the words, "There is a world elsewhere." Just as he was in the act of delivering them, the little fiddler, bursting to make manifest to the audience the heroic self-reliance of the banished consul, struck up the then popular melody, "Paddle your own canoe." He had harped the chord aright. Boxes, pit, and gallery joined energetically in full chorus; and the old German, rising from his music-stool, turned to the house, his face beaming with delight, and bowed his grateful acknowledgments.

But his crowning triumph was yet to come. Thus far he had divided the honours of the night, and poor Coriolanus began to realise how sadly he had miscalculated a Roughley Whitsuntide audience, and that it was like chipping granite with a toothpick to attempt to inoculate their unemotional natures with the poetic fervour of his own. Still he looked hopefully to the last act, fancying the quarrel with Aufidius, and the prospect of a fight which it holds out, might appeal to their sympathies and arouse their enthusiasm. But even in this he was fated to disappointment. The scene went well, and the death was loudly applauded; albeit it evoked a homely censure from an occupant of the pit, who exclaimed, "Sarves 'im domned well roight fur roundin' on t'ould gal" (meaning his mother, Volumnia); but as the soldiers advanced to raise the dead body and bear it off the stage to solemn strains, the fatal fiddle, with flute and trombone accompaniment, once more put in their claim to suffrage. To strengthen the funeral dirge and heighten its *effects*, Herr Schloz had induced his orchestral assistants to

support their instrumentation with a vocal chorus. It ran thus :—

“ Thus Death, who kings and tars despatches,
In vain his life has doffed ;
For though his body's under hatchés,
His soul has gone aloft.”

This was too much. It is the last straw that breaks the camel's back. Primus could bear a great deal, and in his love of, and enthusiasm for, his art, he was accustomed to overlook with manly fortitude many a ridiculous incident ; but in one of his best parts, a character in which his powers had been acknowledged in all the principal theatres in the kingdom, to have his well-won honours plucked from him on a little provincial stage by an unknown, penniless, German fiddler ! Bah ! Flesh and blood could not stand it.

“ Take down the bills from the doors in the morning,” he said to William, as he walked slowly and dejectedly home to his lodgings. “ We'll leave this cursed Roughley to-morrow, and have no more of CORIOLANUS BY THE SEASIDE.”



MY DÉBUT ON THE STAGE.

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THE HERO OF THE FOLLOWING STORY IS A WELL-KNOWN ACTOR,
NOT MANY YEARS SINCE THE RESPECTED LESSEE OF A METRO-
POLITAN POPULAR PLACE OF AMUSEMENT.

IT was in the Christmas week intervening between the exit of the year of grace 1842 and the advent of its successor, that I first seriously conceived the idea of appearing on the stage. My father, good man, with enduring faith in the axiom that learning is better than lands or gold, had kept me at boarding school till I had completed my seventeenth year, though whether this prolonged tuition was induced by actual reliance on the proverb, or by the fact of the lands and gold not being exactly bequeathable about this time, is beyond my ken at the present moment. Anyhow, at school I was kept, a great hobble-de-hoy, impatient of the restraint of the pedagogue, and indignant at being compelled to bundle into bed in broad daylight, on a lovely summer's evening, in company with my schoolfellows in petticoats and knickerbockers. But I had all the pride and aspirations of youth, and well do I remember my ecstasy on leaving school, the first boy in the elocution class, and presenting to my parents, on my arrival home, before I had well discharged my duty to the door-mat, the half-calf bound edition of the "Arabian Nights," awarded me as an appropriate recognition of my oratorical accomplishments.

It was the custom at the Doctor's establishment at Stamford Hill, where I matriculated, to get up theatrical entertainments at the Christmas holidays, and invite to these exhibitions the parents and friends of the pupils. The

plays, as a rule, were selected from Shakespeare's works, and as the local costumier was too exacting for our exchequer in his charge for the hire of brocade and bullion, we resolved on this occasion to throw him over, and enact the tragedy of *Julius Caesar*, where the bed linen could be utilised as togas, and the Roman shirt beneath fairly represented by Brutus donning the night-dress of a lad of ten reaching scarcely down to his knees. The actor's chest being enveloped in the sheet, concealed the shortcomings of the bedgown in that region, and when gracefully pinned up in plaits on the shoulder, really looked as near the orthodox article as could reasonably be expected.

It was as Brutus I distinguished myself that evening, and the applause I received when on the platform, added to the congratulations of the audience after I had left it, inwardly assured me that I had realised Marc Antony's encomium,

"This was the noblest Roman of them all."

One little incident rather disturbed my classic gravity, though it was soon forgotten in the excitement and delight of the scene. Brutus shakes off the mortal coil in the last act, by running on his sword, politely held horizontally by Strato for the impalement. Strato's representative—with whom I was a special favourite—had stationed himself as near the end of the stage as possible, in order to afford me the necessary *aplomb* in approaching the deadly weapon. The impetuosity and dash of my rush knocked him off the balance from his kneeling position, and in falling, he clutched at the calico sheet fastened to the side of the room as a curtain. The fabric being frail, broke from its moorings, and fell to the floor, covering—as with a virgin pall—the bodies of the deceased Roman and his faithful retainer. We scrambled from beneath its folds, and regaining our feet, walked off the platform arm-in-arm, amidst shouts of laughter and derisive applause.

But the seed was sown—the *cacoethes* had taken root! I was conscious of immense superiority over my dramatic colleagues, and felt as convinced then, as I now do that I am penning this narrative, that I was destined for a great career, and to occupy at least a quarto page in the archives

of Thespian fame. What could I not do (I thought) on a regular stage, with the accessories of correct scenery, dresses, and appointments, with gaslights at my feet instead of decimal tallow candles, and an orchestra of proper musicians, in place of the senior Tomkin's flute, and kit-fiddle of the gouty French dancing-master!

The opportunity soon arrived. There flourished, the third of a century ago, in Wilson-street, Gray's Inn-road, a little private theatre, under the proprietorship of one Richard Pym. To this temple and its frequenters I was introduced shortly after the occurrence related, and very soon became initiated into its mysteries, and absorbed in its allurements. No further introduction or ceremony was needed between the ladies and gentlemen, as they were styled, who formed the *corps dramatique*, than the exchange of their theatrical pseudonyms, and thus it came about that within a month—a little month—I became acquainted and enamoured (for to see her was to love her) with the adorable Miss Alicia Bellaire, then a blooming creature about my own age, and eldest daughter of Mrs. George Smith, widow and clear-starcher, of No. 99, Baldwin's-gardens, Leather-lane, E.C. To this lady's domicile Alicia retired nightly for nutrition and repose, after leaving the establishment of Madame Josephine Tibbs—the proprietress of a dingy milliner's shop, in a gloomy street running out of the Mile End-road, where she was engaged six days out of the seven, from nine a.m. till six p.m., in the tasteful manufacture of caps and bonnets, and the arrangement thereon, *à la mode de l'Orient*, of imitation ostrich feathers, or articles of mosaic jewelry from the *ateliers* of the Midland Counties. Yes—she was in truth a milliner, and, as Hotspur puts it, perfuméd like one, though 'twixt her finger and her thumb, in lieu of the pouncet box the gallant officer places in the hand of his fop, she was wont to hold and flutter the prettiest and daintiest of Indian rice fans, with a naïveté of manner Madame Vestris alone could have equalled, and none but the peerless Mrs. Nisbett have excelled.

Well, we met and we loved; the better part of my pocket money allowance I expended on my inamorata in ginger beer and buns, and having passed the evening hours in

such bliss as only stage Romeos express, and Juliets in their 'teens reciprocate, I used to accompany Alicia home to the maternal dovecot, and bid her "good-night" till the morrow, always reserving my parting kiss till I left her at the door, in order to mingle with the sweetness of her lips the flavour of the twopenny Bath bun I had purchased for her at the pastrycook's at the corner of Gray's Inn-road.

The custom was at Mr. Pym's—as at other private theatres—to wafer up in the room where the amateurs assembled on closed nights a notice of coming performances, and, under the title of the play proposed, appeared a list of the characters; opposite to each being affixed the amount the tyro must disburse for its enactment. Many a time and oft did my eyes scan these figures in the hope of finding some part suitable alike to my ambition and my banking account, and where Alicia could appear conjointly as my lover, or my wedded wife. But Romeos and Claude Melnottes were high in the market, and I scorned the notion of an afterpiece, where a testy old fellow, in a worn court suit and frowzy brown wig, is for ever disagreeing with his better-half, in sombre napless velveteen and hair powder, as uncongenial to my own feelings as a lover, besides exhibiting the idol of my soul under the disadvantage of assumed wrinkles and in a peevish mood.

One night I was addressed by a gentleman, many years my senior, who was getting up *Hamlet* for his benefit, and asked whether I would not like to make my first appearance therein as the king. He had, no doubt, observed my young love's dream, as he insinuated that Miss Bellaire, on my compliance, would, in all probability, appear as the Queen. Here was a chance! Claudius and Gertrude are almost inseparable in every scene of the tragedy. They enter hand-in-hand in state to a flourish of trumpets and the beat of big drums; they sit beside each other at the mock play; they stand touching each other over Ophelia's grave; they occupy the same throne in the final scene in loving proximity, and the same gilt pasteboard goblet touches the lips of both ere they die. Enough! The bargain was struck, half-a-sovereign being the sum I was to hand over for the monarchy, and I there and then sealed the contract by

the deposit of my last half-crown piece. At the suggestion of Miss Bellaire—who was credited with great taste in the selection—Adolphus Greville was the *nom de théâtre* finally fixed on as the synonym for James Wilkins, and under which I should become known to posterity. The night of performance came, and, punctually as the clock struck six, I wended my way to Wilson-street. The playbill, with my new name at full length, I pulled out of my pocket to look at, and then folded up and returned there so frequently on my road, that the printing was nearly illegible at the creases long before I arrived at the stage-door. I at once proceeded to the dressing-room allotted me, and tore off my ordinary clothes with the rapidity of a schoolboy about to bathe. In about half an hour I was dressed, with the exception of my long, rabbit-skin-trimmed regal robe, and forwarded to another apartment to be “made up,” lest the paint and powder should fall on that garment and “mess it” in the process. My eyebrows having been burnt-corked till they looked as shaggy as a Scotch terrier’s, and my cheeks overlaid with crape hair to give me “weight” till there was little else visible of my spare countenance than my eyes and nose, I returned to the dressing-room, and assumed the ermine.

My parents were, as I believed, ignorant of these proceedings, and it never occurred to me that they entertained any suspicion concerning them. My father was accustomed to spend his evenings at a public-house where an Odd Fellows’ Lodge was held, and I was usually asleep in bed at the early hour of the morning he returned home, but the mother’s sagacity had an inkling of the truth, accidentally confirmed by a kind female neighbour, describing herself as her son’s well-wisher. I knew that my mother had gone to Hammersmith that day to pay a visit, and so felt secure of my position for the night. But I reckoned without my host; the “well-wisher” had somehow possessed herself of a playbill, and had ascertained, beyond a doubt, that Adolphus Greville and James Wilkins were one and the same person. Determined to spoil sport, she hastened to the mutual friend at Hammersmith, acquainted my mother with her discovery, and, full of wrath and indignation, the



M^r Adolphus Greville is seized at Ophelia's grave by his "Ma."

two ladies returned to town by the last 'bus but one. Claudius and Gertrude had been on in the court scene, and I had taken my first peep at the footlights. Recovering slowly from the perspiration induced by stage fright, I was beginning to feel less uncomfortable, and looked forward with a child's delight to two hours and three-quarters of dramatic paradise. By the time the drop had fallen on the fourth act, I had acquired tolerable confidence, and the best of the fun was yet to come. Not to speak of the churchyard scene, where his majesty, having little to say and a long while to wait, could whisper love and congratulations to his consort, there was the final scene, wherein to support my soul's idol when she fainted, and afterwards meet my death at Hamlet's hands, and expire in my state chair.

It was hard upon ten o'clock, and I was stationed at Ophelia's grave. The priest had pronounced his benediction over the dummy coffin, and Laertes had concluded the usual inquiry whether there was anything more to be done before the shovelful of earth was returned to the pail under the stage, and the skull handed down to the property man, to be put away for the night. Suddenly, a voice, which "foolish custom had made terrible," struck upon my terrified ear, demanding, in spasmodic tones, the whereabouts of Adolphus Greville. The name seemed, like Macbeth's "Amen," to stick in the speaker's throat. Instinctively I hugged my royal mantle closer, and "bonnetted" myself with my diadem for disguise. It was useless; the prompter had pointed out to the enraged parent her erratic offspring, and with a bound, like a mountain goat, she was at my side, grasping with both hands the fluffy collar of my regal envelope. Vainly did I remonstrate, and endeavour to disengage myself from her grip. She quelled my resistance by hissing out loud enough for the audience to hear, "Leave this place instantly, you wicked child, or your father shall know of your doings." Here was a drop! The reigning monarch of Denmark to be addressed as a "wicked child," and threatened with the vengeance of his Pa! My heart sunk within me; I abdicated on the spot, and suffered myself to be dragged ruthlessly off the stage, and pushed, in all my finery, along

the dirty, narrow passage leading to the street, alternately by my loving mother and her friend, the "well-wisher." I was not even allowed to return to the dressing-room for my clothes, but was bundled into a hackney-coach, posted ready at the stage-door for its victim, and driven home, seated between my captors like a criminal in the custody of the police.

The manner in which Hamlet avenged his father's death in the absence of his deposed uncle on that particular occasion, I am unable to inform the curious. I only know that, under renewed threats of paternal communication, I was ultimately induced to retire supperless to my solitary bedchamber, where I lay awake half the night, reflecting on my degradation, and on the result of my ignominious "DÉBUT ON THE STAGE."



THE LATE CHARLES DILLON.

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FEW, if indeed anyone, among my numerous theatrical acquaintance, could relate an anecdote with the racy humour of the late Charles Dillon. The reader's imagination must supply that deficiency in the following story.

When lessee of the Sheffield Theatre in 1856, he was applied to on one occasion for its use for an amateur performance on behalf of some local charity. The play was *Julius Cæsar*, all the *dramatis personæ* being filled by amateurs, save the Imperial victim of the Senate House, who was personated by a Mr. Courte, a member of the manager's stock company. The representative of Marc Antony—a tradesman of the town—had a wholesome dread lest his coming exhibition should reach the ears of his better-half, who entertained an unconquerable aversion to his appearing on the stage, and was, moreover, the grey mare in the would-be Emperor's domestic *ménage*. He consequently assumed a *nom de théâtre*, and strictly impressing on his brother artists the necessity of maintaining the secret, contrived to keep the cat in the bag successfully till the night of performance arrived, when some goodnatured friend, "on sport intent," gave Mrs. Marc Antony "the office" shortly after her husband's departure for the theatre.

To don her most commanding *toilette*, follow him thither, and compel his ignominious retreat was the matron's decision on the instant. She arrived just as Mr. Courte, as Julius Cæsar, had joined the majority, and was lying comfortably at the base of Pompey's statue. Marc Antony stood by his side, arranging his toga in graceful folds, prior

to requesting his deceased friend's forgiveness for his meekness and gentleness towards the Sheffield butchers who, five minutes previously, had given him his quietus with their celebrated town's bare bodkins. Swinging himself round towards the prompt-side to obtain a graceful pose, his eyes lighted on his conjugal partner, who, with bated breath, but uplifted fist, was gesticulating at him in an attitude unhappily too familiar to render hesitation on his part a question of time.

Never was the stage of the Theatre Royal, Sheffield, crossed in fewer strides by the most elastic of acrobats than by Marc Antony, who—apparelled as he was—was in the street in a jiffy, only too pleased, by abandoning the arena, to escape the chastisement his temerity had provoked. Though the audience roared at his precipitate retreat, they were ignorant of the cause, and waited some minutes for the play to proceed. Their patience being exhausted, loud cries arose for the manager, on which Mr. Dillon appeared, and announced that the tragedy must come to an abrupt termination, as the return of the noble Roman to his post was beyond even the pale of hope. This was received with a shout of dissent, and vociferous demands for the return of the admission money. Dillon hesitated a moment, considering how best to quell the impending storm. Suddenly he remembered that the prostrate Emperor was "up" in the character of Antony, having played it to his own Brutus only a few months ago. The idea struck him whether the corpse might not be resuscitated, and so enabled to preach Marc Antony's friendly oration over himself! The fancy tickled him, and advancing to the footlights, he suggested this to the audience as the only alternative to dropping the curtain. They at once received the proposition with that unanimity which Sheridan's Puff declares to be indigenous to the theatre, and in reply to shouts of—"Now then, Courte, lad; up wi'e, and get to work," Julius Cæsar sprang to his feet, divested himself of the Imperial laurel wreath and mantle, and flung them on the stage, as representatives of defunct Imperialism. Then, kneeling beside the garments, he raised his hands heavenwards, and commenced the celebrated oration, "Oh, pardon me, thou bleeding

piece of earth, that I am meek and gentle with these butchers!"

Strange to say, and Dillon assured me of this as a fact, so interested had the audience become in the development of the story that, notwithstanding the absurdity of the situation, the laughter subsided into silence after the first few lines, and the tragedy was listened to to its close with breathless attention.



SHAKESPEARE'S LAST PLAY.

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THE autumn of 1847 had far advanced, the Margate steamers had ceased running for a fortnight, and the wagonettes, promising tourists a trip round the Isle of Thanet for half-a-crown, had all been taken off the road, and the horses turned out to grass and rheumatism. Drivers, with their attendant sprites, who travel all the distance on the hind steps of the vehicle, had exchanged their Jehu's attire for the fustian smock of tillers of the soil; and the ramshackle caravans, wherein these expeditions are performed, had been many days since stowed away in moss-roofed outbuildings and deserted livery stable-yards till next year's genial spring. The bathing machines had been removed from the lonely beach to secure them from the damaging storms of approaching winter, and arranged in long rows up side streets, looking like so many "Cheap Jacks'" depositories camping out for the night on their road to some neighbouring fair. In a word, the season had gone, the year's holiday was at an end, and everyone was preparing to get back to town and resume the business of his everyday life. Many had lingered by the sad sea-shore till the circulating medium had attained the extreme of shabbiness, and rendered speedy return a matter of necessity, while not a few among the many so situated were in a labyrinth of perplexity as to how—when the happy hunting ground was reached—the budget for the coming winter was to be framed so as adequately to provide the needful ways and means. Without positively confessing myself amongst this *class*, it would be sheer affectation to assert that my banking

account boasted double numerals, or to deny that I had not received a notification from the manager of "The National Cockleshell Bank Company, Limited," suggesting that more frequent visits to the "Pay in" counter of that establishment would not be considered as intrusions.

Brooding on this intimation, and mentally reckoning up the amount due to my landlord, the outstanding balance to the butcher, the little "chalk" stuck up at the dairy, and the arrears of the laundress's bill for renovating cuffs and shirt collars, my attention was directed, whilst sauntering up Bow-street, to the window of a theatrical bookseller, then (1847) in the proprietorship of one Edward Turner, and numbered 37. In it were displayed a number of portraits of histrions of a past generation; old newspapers containing critiques on the *débuts* of bygone dramatic celebrities; playbills of first and final performances of almost forgotten exponents of the Tragic and Comic Muses; and a somewhat extensive collection of old play-books, several of these of such remote date as to claim the distinction of curios. Amongst them was a dark blue paper covered pamphlet, whose worn and greasy condition bore unmistakable evidence of antiquity, and the title-page of which read as follows:—"Double Falsehood; or, The Distrest Lovers." A Play as it is acted in the Theatre Royal in Drury-lane. Written originally by W. Shakespeare; and now revised and adapted to the Stage by Mr. Theobald, the author of "Shakespeare Restor'd." London: Printed by J. Watts, at the Printing-office in Wild-court, Lincoln's-inn-fields. MDCCXXVIII. Then followed the cast of *dramatis personæ* on the night of the production; the prologue and epilogue spoken on the occasion; a preface, explanatory of how the MS. came into Mr. Theobald's possession, a dedication to the Right Hon. George Dodington, begging his patronage and protection for a work which it had been the dedicatory's happiness to rescue from obscurity and restore to the stage, and, above all, Letters Patent of His Majesty King George II. granted to Lewis Theobald, for fourteen years to come. Here was an El Dorado; an original play of the "Divine William"—his *last* production, too—lost to the stage for 120 years, and last, though not by

any means least, its authenticity guaranteed by the autograph of a monarch ! Such an opportunity for the manufacture of a little "sugar" was not to be heedlessly thrown aside. The invaluable treasure was ticketed, "The last production of the immortal Shakespeare, 2s. 6d. only." I at once entered the shop, and the gold mine was in my hand, though before sinking a shaft I made a desperate attempt to discount the sixpence, and induce the proprietor's acceptance of "even money," but, finding that gentleman inexorable, I flung the demi-dollar on the counter with a bang, and walked off triumphantly with my prize. Having communicated the lucky *coup* to a friend, an occasional partner with me in theatrical speculations, we promptly decided on the production of *Double Falsehood* on the earliest available chance.

The opportunity soon came. The Theatre Royal Olympic, then licensed to James Cann, of Cursitor-street, Chancery-lane, was in the market, and we became "responsible lessees" of that establishment for "one night only," with the option of indefinite continuance should the public trout accept the fly. We procured the insertion of short paragraphs in some minor theatrical prints, wherein the editorial "we" gave the playgoing world to understand what a treat was in store for it, and shortly afterwards a flaming playbill let the cat out of the bag in the following interesting terms :—

SHAKESPEARE'S LAST PLAY,

Theatre Royal Olympic, Wych-street, Drury-lane,

Licensed by the Lord Chamberlain to James Cann,
24, Cursitor-street, Chancery-lane.

The public is respectfully informed that this Theatre, being the only one at present accessible in the Metropolis, has been taken by a committee of gentlemen, for the purpose of restoring to the stage a treasure which has been lost to it for a period of a hundred-and-twenty years, viz. :—

The last production of the Immortal

SHAKESPEARE !

Discovered in MS., in the handwriting of Downes, the famous prompter, sixty years after his death, by the celebrated LEWIS THEOBALD, and by him presented to His Majesty George I., in 1726, whose successor, George II., in the ensuing year, approving its authenticity, granted to its restorer His Royal Letters Patent for its publication; who accordingly produced it at Drury-lane Theatre forthwith; embracing in its cast the names of Booth, Wilks, and other celebrated actors of that day. Its immense success and brilliant reception only received a check in the lamented death of its patron, since which time

The Play has been lost to the world !

A copy of it, with the King's Patent attached, having been discovered, it has been determined to place it again before the public, assisted by such talent as is at present available, and in a manner not unworthy the fame of its immortal author ! In accordance with this resolution, the above commodious and elegant theatre will open on

Monday, November 22nd, 1847,

When will be presented, with new dresses, decorations, &c.,

By Mr. Nathan, of Tichbourne-street,

Shakespeare's last production, in five acts, entitled

DOUBLE FALSEHOOD ;

OR,

THE DISTRESSED LOVERS.

Then followed the cast, myself and friend *of course* sustaining the two leading characters, the other parts being filled by seedy professionals out of engagement, with a contingent of subordinates from the amateur stage. Miss Fanny Hamilton, who attained some popularity at the Olympic under George Wild's management, was engaged for the heroine, and Mrs. Graham, long associated with Sadler's Wells, personated the second lady. The box-office was opened a few days before the eventful Monday, and as an

allurement to visit it, a notice was appended to the play-bill to the effect that applicants for four dress circle tickets, or a private box (in plain language for the investment of a sovereign), would be favoured with a peep at the play-book *with the Royal Patent attached*. This dodge was sufficiently successful to "dot" the first two rows of the boxes with curious or suspicious auditors, besides disposing of two private ones to a suburban schoolmaster whose pupils had clubbed together the wherewithal to witness the *new play*. The pedagogue having persuaded the box book-keeper to allow him "just to glance" at the *Royal Patent attached*, before investing his scholars' two guineas, had more than half convinced himself that the "get-up" was genuine, and hugged the delusion of the Royal coat of arms as an orthodox hall-mark.

The 22nd November, 1847, arrived with almanack punctuality; the dull, gloomy day universally associated with that month had terminated with a dense fog, through which nevertheless it was not difficult to calculate the few dozen individuals assembled round the pit and gallery doors of the old Olympic, awaiting their opening at half-past six. A buzz of conversation was going on amongst them about the coming event, and as my friend and self, before entering the stage-door, mingled with the group for some minutes in the endeavour to ascertain its tone, the ominous epithets, "a get-up," "swindle," a "do," "humbug," "another Ireland forgery," &c., were unpleasantly audible, and gave fearful presage of a looming storm.

"There'll be a row to-night, Bill," whispered my partner, as we withdrew; "before you go in to dress, run in front and tell George to be sure and bring round the first price receipts all over the house the moment the first act drop's down."

The theatre was nearly half full, the "free list" being extensively patronised, and the recipients of its hospitality judiciously distributed from floor to roof, to lead the applause and ensure, if possible, the success of the spec. All the clocks in the neighbourhood had a full half hour ago proclaimed the advent of seven, the stated hour for commencement, and an additional strain had been put upon the orchestra in the shape of a popular set of quadrilles, as a

supplement to a lengthy overture, in order to quell the impatience that was every moment becoming more pronounced by the clattering of sticks and umbrellas, and above which was unmistakably discernible that wheezing, sibilant sound actors are wont to connect with the Michaelmas bird.

At last the curtain was raised, and for "The interior of a Royal Palace in Andalusia, in Spain," a country at the period of the play in the zenith of its magnificence, appeared a pair of "flats" representing a modern drawing-room, the centre panel almost of a neutral tint, from contact with the dirty hands of the numberless scene-shifters who had "run them on" for the last—I won't say how many years. A titter, with difficulty repressed by the "'sh, 'sh's," "Silence!" "Down in front!" &c., of our friends, expanded into a boisterous guffaw as Duke Angelo and Roderick, his son, stalked on attended by a couple of courtiers (amateurs), one of whom in recognition of "Hallo, Jim!" addressed to him by a youth in the pit, deliberately singled out his friend and returned the salutation with, "All right, old boy," and a familiar nod of the head. I was standing beside the prompter ready for my entrance in the next scene, and can vividly remember, even at this lapse of years, the effect this sally produced, and recall the sudden sinking of my hopes as the conviction flashed across me that the game was up, and *Double Falsehood* an irretrievably gone coon. The scene—a short one—over, a cloth was let down, and "open country with village in distance" took its place. No little hilarity had possessed the audience at the *contretemps* just described, and I congratulated myself that Camillo, my stage parent, had a soliloquy of some twenty lines to deliver before my appearance, which might modify their drollery, and take the rough edge off the chaff.

The reception usually accorded to the leading character was condescendingly vouchsafed, and the scene proceeded midst such growing silence that I was rapidly persuading myself my powers (of which I don't mind *now* confessing I *then* entertained no contemptible opinion) must ultimately silence the jokers and master the discontents. But Mr.

Theobald's Shakespeare had put into his hero's (Julio's) mouth some unfortunate words, and these afforded excuse for further ridicule. Miss Fanny Hamilton (Violante) was a lady to whom Nature had been no niggard in the matter of flesh and muscle, as she scaled about fourteen stone, and her appearance in the following act, in the disguise of a shepherd boy, attired in light green-coloured pants, was the signal for a fresh outburst, that reached its climax when she exclaimed—

“How his eyes shake fire, and measure every piece of youth about me.”

The audience was now thrown entirely out of balance, and all hope of attention and enlisting further interest in the story at an end. To add to our chagrin, the half-price, admitted at the close of the third act, brought a fresh contingent of lively youth, not at all slow in imbibing the spirit of the earlier arrivals, nor in contributing their quota to the fun. As scene succeeded scene, no opportunity was allowed to escape where the dialogue gave an opening for badinage, or was capable of *double entendre*, and as the drama, written in a coarse age, presented many such chances, it may be readily imagined what desperate uphill work it was for the performers to preserve decent gravity and play the tragedy to its close.

At length the curtain fell, long previous to which George, acting upon our oft-reiterated instructions, had brought the entire receipts to the dressing-room my friend and self had appropriated to ourselves. Though not the enormous gold mine we had anticipated, it was large enough to reimburse the outlay, and leave a little to the good, and we were deliberating whether to retain the bird-in-hand, or invest it in renting the theatre another night, when loud shouts of laughter, mingled with slight applause, and a cry of “Manager,” reached our ears. Rushing to the first entrance, the cause of the merriment was soon explained. Some wag in the pit had raised the cry of “Author,” and the idea so tickled the audience that the majority refused to leave without a response being made to the call. This *jeu d'esprit* put the nightcap upon all notion of attempting a second performance, but determined to die game, my

friend hurried to the green-room, where on a rickety shelf over the fireplace figured a life-size plaster bust of the Immortal Bard. Hastily reaching it down, covered with dust an inch thick which he did not wait to remove, he strode majestically on the stage and held it out to the audience. Such a peal of laughter greeted this audacity as completely drowned the indignant hisses of a few reverential malcontents, the fun being capped by the leader of the orchestra, who, mounting his music-stool with stoical gravity, approvingly patted the bald pate of the poet with the end of his fiddle-bow. And thus ended our stage representation of SHAKESPEARE'S LAST PLAY. (See *Frontispiece*.)



A MEMORABLE PERFORMANCE.

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“BILL!” suddenly exclaimed a deep-toned, resonant voice to the writer of this history, “what do you say to a theatrical spec., and a week’s acting in the country?”

“Where and when?” was the rejoinder.

“Why Easter week at Woolwich; the theatre’s to be had for about a fiver, we’d open with a drama, and I could get Grammani and old Hartland, the pantaloons, to vamp up a pantomime, and take a share in the venture.”

“It’s a thing to be thought of,” I replied; and forthwith a colloquy was commenced as to the proposed lesseeship and management of the speculation.

It was in a small, ill-lit, ill-whitewashed, and ill-ventilated parlour at the back of the shop, No. 16, New-street, Covent-garden, that the foregoing conversation took place one Sunday morning in the spring of 1847, between Mr. Charles Shum Gould Gilbert, the proprietor, and myself.

Gilbert (a *nom de théâtre*) was an illegitimate offspring of a Colonel Shum Gould, an officer in the army, who served with some distinction in a cavalry regiment under Wellington in the Peninsular War. Being seriously wounded at the battle of Vittoria in 1813, and believing himself about to join the majority, the Colonel confided to a brother officer, a bosom friend of his youth, the responsibility of educating his son Charles, then a child of seven or eight years, until of a suitable age to be apprenticed to some respectable trade. The foster father of the future boot-maker, theatrical amateur, and lessee of the Royalty Theatre

in the years 1852, '53, and '54—then known as “Miss Kelly’s”—carried out the trust of his friend in the most cheeseparing and parsimonious style. He entertained the idea, indigenous to that age, that a youth whose future energies were to be devoted to “trade” had little need of further education than is comprised in the three R’s, and consequently young Gould was packed off to a beggarly day school in the neighbourhood of Long Acre, for the acquirement of this erudition, and a small sum paid regularly to an elderly female, residing in Little Compton-street, for his lodging, clothing, and weekly maintenance. The boy was endowed with a natural aptness and quickness of perception unusual in a child of his years, and having little attention paid him by the aged custodian, whose sympathies did not extend beyond the punctual collection of the allowance, became instinctively observant of what was passing around him, and noticed how children of his age amused their play hours, when destitute of that museum of toys which ornaments the nursery or schoolroom of the wealthier class. His mind took an early dramatic bias, and not content with white satining the trousers of the British sailor, or tinselling the “Pirate of the Seas” till his person was armed to the teeth like a porcupine, and looked as impenetrable as an armadillo, he accompanied the performance of these pasteboard characters on the stage of his home-made playhouse with appropriate dialogue; thus early acquiring that distinctness of utterance and vivacity of gesture which gave life and sprightliness to his conversation, and distinctive colouring to the many amusing reminiscences of his youth that he was wont to relate so vividly up to a ripe old age. Occasional visits to the galleries of the minor theatres fostered his elocutionary taste, and made him a staunch believer in the autocracy of lungs; for the dramas of that day bristled with national and moral sentiments, and the hero or heroine was always looked upon as more or less patriotic or virtuous in proportion to the strength of his or her organs of respiration.

At the age of thirteen the lad was apprenticed to a boot-maker, a nominal premium for the privilege having been paid by his guardian to a professor of that craft, and with

this man alone for companion, the poor boy passed several years, working all day in a dismal cellar, lighted only through a grating in the street, and sleeping in a tumbledown garret—the bedchamber also of his master—on a trestle camp bedstead, the gift of his military protector. The cordwainer was a hard taskmaster, never dreaming of relaxation for himself or pupil; he lived in a style no pauper of the present day would submit to without abusing the Bumbledom of the Union, or invoking the assistance of the Sunday Press; and when the labours of the day were over, and the frugal meal despatched—usually consisting of bread and Dutch cheese, and never rising beyond the dignity of a dried herring—he would light up his pipe, and persist in reading aloud to the lad till the bedtime hour arrived, Tom Paine’s “Age of Reason,” Mirabeau’s “System of Nature,” or some similar philosophic and atheistic work. Little wonder that, thus deprived of all social intercourse, the boy’s manners were brusque and his person slovenly; still, his mind, naturally well given, yearned to break away from such bondage, and to mix in scenes and acquire habits more congenial to its bent. The opportunity arrived. The death of his master cancelling his indenture of apprenticeship, he transferred his services to another translator of soles, with whom he resided in Red Lion-street, Holborn, and a friendship quickly took root between the new associates. Here books were at his command, works both of instruction and amusement, and the young man’s leisure hours were spent principally in perusal of the former, the purpose and endeavour of his studies being the acquisition of such knowledge as would ultimately sever his connection with leather and prunella. Young Gould’s frugality, steadiness, and perseverance so gained upon his employer, that, after some years, he being then an old man without chick or child to provide for, he made over the business to his protégé, under an agreement providing that the stock-in-trade should be paid for by easy instalments from the profits. Some time afterwards, the house in Red Lion-street being required for parochial improvements, Mr. Gould was bought out by the Board of Works, and, though not in accordance with his taste, which looked towards the stage as his

future profession with a longing eye, his prudence got the better of his will, and he invested the proceeds of the sale of his business in purchasing the lease of the boot and shoe establishment in New-street, where the reader made his acquaintance in the opening words of our tale.

Here he gave free rein to his dramatic *penchant*, there being scarcely a week in the twelvemonth wherein his name did not figure in the bill of some metropolitan or suburban theatre. If a benefit for a decayed veteran actor was suggested as feasible on some minor stage, Mr. Gilbert was the hero of the evening, in consideration of his disposing of a certain number of tickets. If the Greenwich, Kensington, or Richmond Theatre was in the market for a *season* of three or six nights, Charles at once became its *pro tem.* proprietor. The dingy parlour at the back of the shop—all the rest of the house being let off—served at once as his breakfast and dining-room, library, and bed-chamber, the latter, a unique arrangement on the top of an antiquated oak wardrobe, some nine feet high, and two in width, to which access was obtained by transferring from the shop the ten-step ladder that served, during business hours, to reach down “stock” from the upper shelves.

On Sunday mornings, from the hour of eleven till one, when the opening of the public houses caused an interval, and not unfrequently an exodus of the conclave, this gloomy apartment was the acknowledged rendezvous of dramatic amateurs—the trysting-place of youthful aspirants desirous of figuring in coming displays, and prepared to part with the savings of the last two months’ pocket-money for that seductive privilege; and a kind of club-room for older stagers on the look-out for a similar opportunity, should anything like a decent character turn up on the free list. Pipes and coffee—the latter delicacy manufactured and served out by Mr. Gilbert in person, at twopence per cup, “just to cover expenses”—accompanied these Sabbatarian réunions; and here performances were arranged, characters distributed, first rehearsals gone through, and the tickets, which the proprietor had taken from the veteran *beneficiaire*, re-issued to the novice at no trifling percentage.

Let us now hark back to the eventful Sunday morning

in the spring of 1847. Mr. Gilbert briefly explained that the Woolwich Theatre was in hand, and that to open it for the Easter week was to discover a mine of wealth old Croesus himself might have coveted, and to furnish a fund of amusement for ourselves compared to which the familiar "happy day" at Rosherville was positive torture. The catalogue of third-rate professional actors out of an engagement, and of first-rate amateur ones assiduously in search of such bondage, was run through in a jiffy; the pieces for the first three nights then and there proposed and decided on, and Gilbert was to look up the pantomimists before-named, and endeavour to enlist their services in forming a commonwealth. This was done, and the company materially strengthened by the addition of W. H. Ridgway and his sister as harlequin and columbine. Every pantomimic clown of that day, whatever his vocal deficiency, was required to favour his audience with a song soon after he assumed the motley, and it suddenly flashed across Grammani's recollection that George Bolton, the Olympic lessee, boasted amongst his numerous stage properties a wicker-work donkey!—A brother zany had warbled "Hot Codlings" and "Tipperty-witchet" thus mounted in an East-end pantomime the preceding Christmas, and he knew a large number of the gay-coloured posters that adorned the Whitechapel walls at that season representing him in the act, still remained on hand, and were procurable for a tithe of their original cost. Here was a brilliant idea! "My Gee Woh and my Granny!" The consistency of this ditty, when delivered *à cheval*, would extinguish the fame of the time-honoured apple song, and cast "Tipperty-witchet" into the shade for ever.

About this time an exhibition of Poses Plastiques was very popular at the Walhalla in Leicester-square, the present site of the Empire Theatre, and it was agreed, as a canny policy, to engage a small troupe of male and female artists (?), and transfer—at least on the bills—the living sculpture of the Hall of Rome from the metropolitan Acropolis to the Woolwich boards. Exhibitions of this kind were then in their infancy, and, like the Minstrels of *the present day*, "never performed out of London." To

provide a revolving table for the classic groups was beyond even the pale of hope, but the deficit was more than counterbalanced by the reflection that the crafty stratagem imposed on the costumier, of adapting his limited stock of statuary fleshings to the anatomy of the *scratch* Gods and Goddesses, would be less apparent to the audience in mythological *statu quo*, than if presented all round under a dazzling lime-light.

All being prepared, huge posters announcing the opening night of the Theatre Royal, Woolwich, during Easter week, "under entirely new management," were entrusted to the local bill-sticker to be displayed all over the town, surmounted in each case, by a flaming cartoon of a life-size clown on a full-size donkey, so as to arouse the enthusiasm of the garrison town for the *recherché* treat in store for them.

Easter Sunday morning, at eleven o'clock, the company were to be assembled on the landing-stage at the foot of London-bridge, and proceed to the happy hunting-ground by the Woolwich steamboat. Punctual as a German brass band before your hotel door at the seaside breakfast-hour, all were on the spot as the clock struck. One face alone bore traces of haste and disappointment : it was Grammani's. He had deferred, till the day of departure, obtaining possession of the property donkey so obligingly loaned by the Olympic lessee, and on presenting himself at an early hour at the stage-door for the treasure, he found the hall-keeper as obdurate as a sheriff's officer. Mr. Bolton had neglected to leave instructions for its delivery, and the clown's eloquence was inadequate to induce him to swerve from his duty. A proposal to run back to town for it on the Monday was negatived, by the impossibility of anyone's absence from rehearsal on that morning, and a successful mode of dealing with the dilemma formed the topic of discussion, till all were landed safely at the Woolwich Dock-yard Pier. Here the troupe broke up into small knots, each proceeding to the selection of quarters suitable to their taste, or, to speak more truthfully, to their pockets. Our party put up at a humble hostelry in Beresford-street, immediately opposite the theatre, and a contract was at once concluded with the landlord, for bed and board for

half-a-dozen persons for a stated daily sum. By way of sampling the fare, dinner was to be got ready without delay ; and, that disposed of, the manager and a few friends sauntered leisurely, pipe in mouth, along the road that leads to Blackheath-common, the donkey difficulty being uppermost in the mind of everyone, as each coign of vantage passed on the way exhibited his portrait in chameleon hues. A boy driving lazily forward a small herd of these animals was a few score yards in our van.

"I say, Charley," exclaimed one of the party, dealing Mr. Gilbert a smart smack on the shoulder by way of emphasizing his discovery, "blowed if I don't see a way out of the donkey hobble. Why not have a live one for Grammani to-morrow night?"

"By Jove ! Bill," replied the impressario, returning the whack with an interest that would have made the eyes of a money-lender twinkle, "you've hit it. Holloa, you boy !" he shouted to the driver of the team, and in another minute that functionary and the Woolwich lessee were standing side by side.

"I want to hire one of those donkeys, my boy, for to-morrow night."

"Sixpence a hour, Sir ; 'ave which you likes."

"That big one looks the best ; I want him for the clown at the theatre."

"Sixpence a hour, Sir, as long as you likes."

"He won't be wanted above ten minutes."

"Sixpence a hour, Sir ; we can't take no less."

The price and the hour were so stereotyped on the lad's mind that to separate them was a hopeless task ; so the hour of ten on the morrow night, and the sum of sixpence absolutely, were stipulated for boy and beast's attendance at the stage-door of what the former resolutely persisted in designating "the play 'us." The attractions offered to the Woolwich public on this memorable Easter Monday consisted of Maturin's tragedy of *Bertram*, pared down into three acts, the Poses Plastiques Exhibition, from—very far from—the Hall of Rome, and the grand comic pantomime of *Harlequin Little Red Riding Hood ; or, Rodolph the Wolf*.

It was a pitiless night, the rain coming down in torrents, and the wind rushing along the street with a violence it was difficult to withstand. The entrance to boxes, pit, and gallery nearly adjoining each other, made the visitants assembled at the doors appear no contemptible crowd, and the hearts of the commonwealth company beat high with anticipation, as they hurried down the dark and dirty narrow passage beside the theatre conducting to the stage entrance. It was verging on eight o'clock ; the drop had just fallen on the first act of *Bertram*, and that romantic hero was standing at the prompt wing, complimenting the dark-haired little girl who enacted Imogine's child on the way she had comported herself in the scene just concluded. Through the shrill whistle of the wind, and the patter of the rain on the skylight, a loud rat-tat was heard at the back.

"Bill," said Bertram to St. Aldobrand, who was standing by his side, "run and see who's that at the door." In obedience to the order the bolt was drawn, when boy and donkey, both miserably drenched, were scarcely recognisable in the darkness. "We shan't want you these two hours ; come again at ten o'clock." "Please let's come in, master, we're so wet ; I shan't charge yer on'y the sixpence."

The good St. Aldobrand yielded to the appeal and admitted boy and beast, strictly admonishing the former to remain perfectly still at the extreme back of the stage.

The second act of the tragedy was drawing to a close. Bertram had discovered the faithlessness of Imogine by that lady's open confession of her espousal with his rival, in order, as she filially put it, "to save a famishing father ;" and the hero of the night, artistically swathed in a blood-red shirt, decorated with squares of brass the size of window panes, to tinkle and make him look savage, was pointing out to his distracted ipamorata, in measured blank verse, the ruthless manner in which he would anatomize her husband by way of revenge for her cruel infidelity. St. Aldobrand stood at the O. P. wing, sword in hand, awaiting his dissection, after clinking weapons for a few minutes with the desperate Bertram, to let the audience know, as they were unable to see his swordmanship, what a devil of a

fellow he was, and how obstinately he defended the pathway to his heart. The breathless silence of the audience enabled the donkey proprietor to catch the louder portion of the dialogue, and in his anxiety to see what was going on, he had crept gently past each wing till he and his beast of burden stood actually cheek by jowl with the gallant knight. Bertram espied the intruders from the stage, and the hour of the night, the contract with the boy, and the probable expansion of sixpence into at least a florin, flashed across his economic mind, and intermingled with the dialogue thus :—

Bertram (looking off). Ha ! Those felon slaves are come—
He shall not perish by their ruffian
hands.

Mine be the task to slake his life's
heart blood !

(Exit O. P. to sacrifice St. Aldobrand.)

St. Aldobrand (within). Off, villain, off !

(Violent clash of swords.)

Bertram (aside to Boy). Why the devil did you come so early? *(To St. Aldobrand.)* Die, villain, die ! *(Continuous clash of swords.) (To Boy.)* By G—— I'll only pay you sixpence.

Boy. All right, master. *(Swords still clashing.)*

St. Aldobrand. Oh, I am slain ! oh, oh !

Bertram. This to thy soul, for I am Bertram. *(To stage carpenter.)* George, turn the d—d beast into the road, and pop the boy in the gallery. *(To St. Aldobrand.)* Bill, go in, and give 'em a back fall.

St. Aldobrand staggered on mortally wounded, and gave the required tumble amidst a torrent of applause. Bertram followed, and planting his left foot on the body, pointed his bloody sword to the border lights in approved melodramatic fashion, whilst the donkey, at this critical moment, stalking leisurely in from the wing, proceeded to examine the cotton velvet trunks of the defunct St. Aldobrand as the act drop slowly descended. The play was virtually over, as the shouts of laughter could not be repressed, and rendered the final scenes little else than dumb show.

An hour had elapsed, a set of quadrilles had been played



The death of St. Aldobrand.



through, and the Poses Plastiques Exhibition had commenced. Ajax had defied the electric fluid with his usual coolness and impertinence, the Roman had put his sandal to rights according to the classic model, and the female artist number two had gracefully grasped the waists of the two Roman warriors, as the youngest of the three Horatii who, as we all know, were such terrible Turks about the year 667 B.C. The fourth tableau was called. The representative of "Innocence" was a perfect novice to the stage, and vastly addicted to that terrible vice from which even the staid Lady Macbeth was not entirely exempt. As Mr. Blanchard once wittily remarked of a similar Goddess of Love, she seemed rather to have sprung from "the scum of the earth" than the mythological "froth of the sea." She had endeavoured to fortify herself for her task by repeated appeals to hot rum and water during the evening, and long before the time for her appearance on the platform had got—to put it mildly—tolerably braced up. With enormous difficulty and extreme caution, her matronly figure had been persuaded into a set of fleshings intended for a nymph of sweet seventeen, and the tension of the silk had been put to a severe test, to accommodate the fleshy burden it enclosed. As the Woolwich playhouse did not possess a "property" dove for "Innocence" to cuddle, a live pigeon from an adjoining bird-fancier's shop had been procured as a substitute, and was now placed in the hands of the drunken lady, who, being just about to mount the platform, renewed her application to the Wedderburn, and pronounced herself "all right." Gingerly did the unsteady statue ascend the three whitewashed steps, lest the fragile texture should let go a reef, and so betray its trust. Hush! it's all right; she's landed safe, and posed.

"Now keep steady, my dear," said the prompter, "and don't take your eyes off the pigeon."

The bell rings, and the curtain is raised. The glare of the footlights and the novelty of her position at once made the statue uneasy, and she lost her pose by a sudden jerk, in endeavouring to retain the bird, who was making furious efforts to regain his freedom. He succeeded in a few seconds, and flew round the theatre to the frantic delight of

furtherance of his handiwork, seeks to follow in the footsteps of his great Original, and that the motto of his daily life should be the proud "Excelsior?"

And to what, pray, inquires the gentle reader, may all this trite philosophy point? Simply, Messieurs et Dames, I reply, to the popular little theatre in the Strand, the bonny bandbox of a house now so ably presided over by its respected proprietress, Mrs. Swanborough, and which, since its establishment, as the New Strand Theatre some half a century ago, has undergone all the gradations of butterfly life, and been subject to every vicissitude and change of the puppets in a fantoccini show.

At the time of our tale its destinies were directed by a gentleman whom, on *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* principle, we shall christen Mr. Schott Comyns. This impressario had contrived, during a short summer season, by sundry cunning devices, to keep the portals of his dramatic temple ajar; to say "open" would be a misnomer, for under various pretences, such as "Closed for a night rehearsal of the new piece," or "In consequence of the sudden indisposition of Miss or Mr. Stopgap," the severity of whose attack was guaranteed by the dummy certificate of a bogus physician, three or four nights only in each week were devoted to public entertainments. Entertainment, by the way, is a term of grace, accorded by custom to stage exhibitions of all kinds, without reference to their quality, or the amount of amusement they afford.

By such stratagems as these Comyns managed to hold on like grim death through the sultry summer weather, though it were vain to deny the peregrinations of the ghost on "treasury days" were often limited to the shortest and most ambling of promenades, in the hope that the lengthening shadows of autumnal days would bring more grist to the mill, and enable him, at the approach of winter, to vamp up some festive hodge-podge wherewith to regale his patrons at Christmas time.

Dodge after dodge did Mr. S. C. resort to for "extra" and "special" nights. Charities, ignorant to this day, so far as regards any addition to their funds of such advantages, were credited with benefit after benefit under this mag-

nanimous manager's rule; patrons, to whom the very existence of the little theatre was a myth, figured at the head of the playbills, as giving their presence with their patronage on "this particular occasion;" actors, unable to pursue their professional duties, through severe accidents or chronic maladies, appealed to a generous and sympathising public, times out of mind after their fractured limbs had been "reduced," and the discarded crutches converted into broom-handles, and when their inveterate disorders had long yielded to pill or potion, and the anti-rheumatic flannel vest been exchanged for spangled "fly" or tinselled tunic; and on one occasion, driven to his wit's end, and as a forlorn hope, the hat having been sent round so repeatedly, that the glimmer of a doubt was perceptible in front of the curtain, as to the *bona fides* of these constant ruses, the name of the senior churchwarden of St. Clement Danes—the jovial Boniface of a neighbouring "pub."—was utilised as having taken the theatre for one night only, with the charitable object of raising a fund for the deserving widow of a Clare Market butcher, in the last stage of consumption, whose sufferings and distress were known to—and we may fairly surmise *only* to—the church officials and the Strand lessee.

It was one of these special nights, to quote the authority of the playbill, whose reputation for veracity, as all the world knows, is unimpeachable, that Mr. Schott Comyns had set aside for his third annual benefit that season. Impecunious lessees employ the term "annual" in connection with their benefit nights promiscuously, and quite apart from any significance it may bear to the orthodox calendar. To the needy one these adjectives and substantives are as inseparable as smoke from fire, and as much a part of the bill of fare as a pea of its pod. True, it is that, when brought face to face with the Basinghall-street Commissioner, it was Mr. Comyns' wont to attribute his present hopeless state of insolvency to a series of these unfortunate rallyings of his friends; but whether the receipts on such occasions warranted the statement, or whether it was a mere *coup de théâtre* of the "cannie mon" to induce his creditors' acceptance of a one and eightpenny dividend, in lieu of the

standard golden token of the realm to which they were legally entitled, is a conundrum at whose solution it would be ungracious to hazard a guess. In fact, there exists so much legerdemain in things dramatic, both before and behind the curtain, that an outsider is posed to detect the jugglery, and explain how the strings are pulled.

These managerial benefits were worked in divers ways, no unusual plan being to obtain the support and assistance, or—to speak by the card—in the majority of cases the assistance without the support, of some recently-formed amateur club who, unwilling—like Thespis of old—to begin in a cart, was ambitious of giving the public a taste of its quality on the boards of a regular theatre. When such services were not procurable collectively, a performance was organised for the *début* of some aspiring Hamlet or Macbeth, Mr. Comyns undertaking, with self-sacrificing generosity, to provide the entire *dramatis personæ* from his extensive professional and amateur corps.

A neophyte Richard III. having been secured, in the person of a Mr. Howard Gordon, whose resources, by severe squeezing, yielded the metallic strain, Shakespeare's tragedy of that name was announced in due form, the entire arrangement of production being entrusted by that gentleman, with the unsuspecting confidence of youth, to the manager's well-tried experience and diplomacy. The budding Duke of Gloster, having only donned the buskin in a few subordinate characters in private, urged the necessity of numerous rehearsals, but Mr. C., while admitting such advantages, pointed out the inseparable expense, and conscientiously considered the number might safely be reduced in exact ratio with the limits of the Royal Prince's treasury; but as the *porte-monnaie* of the scion of the House of York had already been tested to its utmost tension in furnishing the ten pound deposit—for Comyns remained inflexible as granite to the suggestion of a "fiver" standing over against the receipts of the night—nothing remained for him but to bow to circumstances, and submit to the exigencies of an ill-lined purse.

"Take my word, Mr. Gordon," said the manager, when the tyro's last sou had been extracted, "and I speak with

the authority of a lengthened experience, one good rehearsal is better—ininitely better—than half-a-dozen imperfect ones. We'll have everybody here. I'll make the 'call' for half-past ten, so that if we find any little hitch among the supers we can run over the scene a second time."

"But," said the youth with diffidence, and only half assured, "*Richard the Third* is a very full piece, Mr. Comyns, and for the credit of the theatre, I think——"

"Make your mind perfectly easy on that account," replied the manager; "you may depend upon *that* being my very first consideration."

"I am afraid," pursued Mr. Gordon as a last effort, and assuming the suasive tone intended for Lady Anne in his courtship, "you rely too much upon *me*. I am letter perfect in the words, but some of my 'business' may require explanation to the ladies and gents in the throne scene."

"You can trust implicitly to the gentlemen," remonstrated Mr. Comyns, with a somewhat reproachful emphasis on the last syllable. "Everybody in the cast has played the character before, Sir, and one word to an experienced actor is enough. As for the ladies, the Duchess of York is a matron, and the mother of many aspiring Glosters; and I am sure Mdlle. Christine Zema (your Lady Anne), though comparatively a novice on the boards, possesses the true intuition of genius, which, you will admit, Mr. Gordon, more than counter-balances the experience of a less fertile intelligence."

Mr. Gordon found himself but a poor match for the Strand lessee's logic, for all the force of the former's argument had vanished with his last sovereign, and the latter was, to all intents and purposes, the man in possession.

"You will take care that everybody attends the rehearsal on Monday," whispered Richard III. dejectedly, as they shook hands at the stage-door; "you know I am entirely in your hands, and I should not like the public to feel that——"

"My dear Sir," returned Mr. Comyns, squeezing the Duke of Gloster's palm with a grip that sent pins and needles nearly up to his arm-pit, "you have said enough."

You have my word, Mr. Gordon. I shall see you on Monday. Farewell!"

Monday arrived, as did Mr. Howard Gordon with the punctuality of the sun, presenting himself at half-past ten at the stage-door of the New Strand Theatre. He had some days previously arranged with his employer, a solicitor of standing in the New Inn, for a day's absence from "office," on the plea of assisting his mother in packing up, that lady being about to transfer her worldly possessions from a ten-and-sixpenny floor lodging in Newcastle-street, to a less pretentious abode in a neighbouring court. For weeks past the youth had lived in a ferment of hope, expectation, and neglect of his duties. His weekly 30s. stipend had been hoarded up for months, in order to be let off, like a rocket, with a bang at the end. He had run in debt for clothes, obtained credit for his daily meals at dining-rooms adjacent to his office, by promising the head waiter unlimited admissions for the dress circle on the eventful evening, and contrived to wheedle his widowed mother out of a portion of her meagre pittance, to pay, as he assured her, some pressing debts, and prevent the loss of his situation through a summons to the County Court. For a whole quarter of a year had he lived in a fool's paradise, hugging the idea that his fate was the stage, and that when once his hump-backed Dick had seen the footlights, fame, ease, and fortune would grovel at his feet.

"Who do you want?" growled the stage-door Cerberus, as Mr. Gordon was about to cross the threshold of the sanctum.

"I've come to the rehearsal," replied the youth, in as sonorous a tone as he could command, to impress the official with his importance as the leading man.

"Rehearsal! what rehearsal?" echoed the door-keeper, "there ain't no rehearsals on now. The theaytur's shut up for the season."

"The rehearsal of *Richard the Third* for to-night," simpered our hero, half doubting the fidelity of his ears or understanding.

"Oh, the hamatour job," tittered the man, "I'd forgot *all about that*. There's a rehearsal on, then, is there?"

"Certainly," exclaimed Mr. Gordon, "at half-past ten precisely; are many of the ladies and gents come?"

"I ain't seen nobody yet," returned the Cerberus, "they allers takes half-a-hour's law, you know; that is, them as comes."

"They who come!" echoed the tragedian, the echo, with Hibernian politeness, adapting itself to an amendment of the speaker's grammar.

"Ay, them as comes," repeated the door-keeper, entirely regardless of the correction. "You ain't spoon enough, I 'spose, to expect 'em *all* here."

"Indeed I am, though," cried Richard III., with a confident jerk of the head, and suddenly forgetful of his tragic dignity. "Mr. Comyns gave me his word of honour, on Saturday, everybody should be here at half-past ten to the tick."

"Did he though?" grinned the man with a chuckle. "Then it's all right o' course. You knows the guv'ner, I 'spose?"

"Intimately," rejoined Mr. Gordon.

"Ah, then," returned the door-keeper, "there's no call to make yer uneasy about nothin'," with which consoling observation he coolly seated himself on a broken rush-bottom chair inside the doorway, and drawing from his coat pocket a greasy copy of last week's *Bell's Life*, became soon absorbed in the details of a prize fight recently decided in the Midland Counties for £100 a-side.

Mr. Gordon walked rapidly up the narrow court which, previously to the rebuilding of the theatre, led from the stage entrance to the Strand, and stared up and down that thoroughfare with feverish anxiety for a good quarter of an hour, without being gratified by any arrival of the nobility of York or Lancaster. At last two slender lads, scarcely out of their teens, and having the appearance of office-boys, turned sharply into the court, followed, a minute later, by three dilapidated, frouzy individuals, in well-worn fustian, the youngest two smoking short clay pipes, and the third, a man of seventy, hobbling after them as well as he could with the assistance of a stout ash stick. These were supers, destined at night to represent the gallant army to whose

courage and devotion the hump-backed tyrant confides the hazard of the die, and the two consumptive-looking youths were no others than the representatives of sturdy Stanley and the warlike Catesby, whose nocturnal feuds, when encased in dazzling steel and allied to their respective factions, were, as yet, not even in the womb of thought. Nearly another quarter of an hour elapsed before Mdlle. Christine Zema alighted from a 6d. omnibus (penny 'busses were unknown in those days), and tripped down the court with the alacrity of a ballet girl. Mr. Gordon wrung her hand with the cordiality of a life's friendship, and accepted her apologies for being "a little behind time" with the studied grace of a dancing master. Two minutes more, and Mr. Schott Comyns himself made his appearance, bearing a play-book in his hand, and a bundle of house-bills under his arm. To unrol them, and display in extra bold type the names of Mr. Howard Gordon and Mdlle. Christine Zema was the work of an instant, and saved any reference to the variation of his watch with the church clock of St. Clement Danes.

"We must get to work at once," said the manager, having ordered the "rake" to be lighted, and seated himself at the table in front of the stage. "Act I. Scene I. Enter Lieutenant and Officer R.S.E. Lieutenant and Officer, where are you? No matter, they only speak a line each. Enter Stanley L. Now, my lord, on with you, here at the first entrance. That's right,"—*to his joyful queen*. "Well, what are you stopping for?"

It was the youth's first dramatic attempt, and he had no idea of taking up a cue. Mr. Comyns briefly explained the process, and then inquired for his majesty King Henry the VI.

"Please, guv'nor," said our old acquaintance the door-keeper, who was call-boy, property man, and general factotum, "Mr. Johnson won't be here this morning. He's got an engagement in the City."

"Of course, I remember," said the impresario, "he told me so on Saturday. You need not be uneasy about *him*, Mr. Gordon, he's played the part a score of times at least. Well, then, that brings us to the end of the first act."

"Hadn't I better go through the soliloquy?" suggested the Duke of Gloster meekly.

"Pooh!" rejoined Mr. Comyns, with a smile of ineffable contempt. "A mere waste of time, Sir. I would not pay so poor a compliment to your devotion to your art as to suppose you had not the words at your fingers' ends. Tell Mr. Johnson at night where you wish him to fall after you have stabbed him, and I'll engage he shall die on the spot to an inch. Act II. Enter Tressell L. Stay, I forgot. Mr. Watson asked me to excuse him, and apologise to you for his non-attendance. He's the second cashier at Messrs. Crinoline and Co., the drapers in Oxford-street. They've discovered some defalcation in the petty cash, and there's to be an examination of the books this morning, which he is obliged to attend. He'll be all right at night, rely on it. Enter Lady Anne and procession. Jones and Grogson (this to two supers) you will precede the coffin with halberds reversed, and stand just clear of the archway. The coffin will *not* be brought on, Mr. Gordon, for you see it generally occasions a laugh, and we mustn't have any pleasantries in *this* scene. Now, you can run through your scene with Miss Zema; I'm sure I can't be of any assistance to either of *you*, so I'll just pop into the Strand and get a glass, for I feel nearly parched with so much talking. I'll be back in ten minutes."

Within a shade of the allotted time Mr. Comyns had returned, and resumed his seat at the table.

"Scene III. Buckingham and Lord Stanley. Mr. Greville (this to the youthful Stanley). I have taken on myself the responsibility of excusing Mr. Smith (Buckingham) from rehearsal," said the manager. "He's engaged in the Drury-lane pantomime, now in course of rehearsal, as first policeman in the rallying scene, and his attendance here would expose him to a fine from the lessee of the National Theatre. I feel sure, under such circumstances, I need not appeal to the generosity of the present company." Here he blandly smiled at Gloster's representative, who blushed up to the rim of his hat. "Enter Duchess of York. Mrs. Tippler, first right entrance, if you please."

"If you please, Sir," whispered the door-keeper in the

manager's ear, "Mrs. Tippler has stepped over to the 'Spotted Dog' for a few minutes. She said she was starved, standing about here so long this cold morning, and dying for a little hot spirit and water. Shall I run over and tell her the stage waits?"

The necessity for the errand was done away with by the return of the lady, wiping her mouth.

"I did not hurry, Mr. Comyns," interposed her Ladyship of York to that gentleman's remonstrance of delay, "for Mr. Smith and Mrs. Flaunty won't be here, you know, and I don't see how we can do the scene without Buckingham and the Queen."

"Very true," exclaimed Mr. Comyns, eager to avail himself of the proffered omission, "then we can pass on to the third act. Act III. Crosby Palace. State chair and stool C. Remember those properties, Oldfield."

The factotum bowed his head familiarly, in token of obedience.

"Now," resumed the manager, "I really fear I must assume the rôle of apologist. My two daughters, who play the Princes, Mr. Gordon, are unfortunately suffering from severe colds, and all my efforts with their mother were futile to induce her to allow their attendance. The morning was so bleak that no amount of wrapping up would reassure Mrs. Comyns against the risk. I am really grieved, for the dear children are such conscientious artists; I assure you they deeply feel the disadvantage of their absence. But they are old hands, Mr. Gordon, and you can safely rely on them to carry out any little 'business' you suggest to me."

Mr. Gordon, having no little "business" to suggest, bowed gracefully, and warmly acknowledged the proffered privilege.

"The absence of Mr. Smith," resumed the manager, "unfortunately interferes with our concluding the scene, so we pass on to Lady Anne and Gloster. Would you like to run through the words with Miss Zema, or do you consider it unnecessary, Mr. Gordon?"

Mr. Gordon did *not* consider it unnecessary, so Mr. Comyns gave some instructions to the three supers lounging *at the back of the stage*, while Gloster informed his injured

wife how thoroughly she had contrived to outlive his liking. Lady Anne, having dried her tears, joined her brutal husband at the prompt wing, and graciously complimented him on his assumed ferocity. She had no idea that he could look so fierce, and felt confident the scene would go splendidly at night. Gloster expressed his delight at her admiration of his villainy, and was equally confident Miss Zema's pathos would soften the heart of a savage.

"That scene was admirable!" exclaimed Mr. Comyns, resuming his seat at the table. "I was really not prepared for such finished elocution. Miss Zema, allow me to congratulate you on your portrayal of affliction. Believe me, I was touched."

Miss Zema acknowledged the compliment with a courtesy, for a parallel to which we must go back to the buckram days of George the Fourth's youth.

"Come, we must push along," said the manager, "time is on the wing. As Buckingham and Catesby are absent, it will be useless to go through the scene with the Lord Mayor. Oldfield, you'll do the Mayor, you can read it from the book; it will look as if you were presenting an address. We are obliged to resort to a little finesse now and then, Mr. Gordon, to prevent subordinate characters falling into incompetent hands. Act IV. The Presence Chamber. Richard on throne. Everybody on here. Flourish of trumpets as scene opens. I'm almost afraid we must skip this scene, Mr. Gordon, and trust to the intelligence of all concerned. It's a touch-and-go scene, you see, and nothing can be done with it unless everyone is present. It's rather unfortunate, perhaps, on a *special* occasion like this, but I have frequently known these scenes go better haphazard than when time and attention have been expended on them. I must claim your indulgence for the omission, but I pledge you my honour I will do my utmost at night to remedy any little deficiency. Mr. Gordon, you had better perhaps just try your voice with the last speech, 'Why, ay, this looks rebellion; ho! my horse!' so as to ensure the act-drop coming down with a *furor*."

The newly-crowned monarch greedily accepted the challenge, and from that moment forgave Mr. Comyns from

the bottom of his heart all the shortcomings of the rehearsal.

"Mr. Gordon," said the manager, leading forward a cadaverous-looking individual of six feet two, "Permit me to introduce to you Mr. Gauntly, your Earl of Richmond. I engaged Mr. Gauntly at additional expense, in order that you might have a foeman worthy of your steel. As a swordsman I may say he stands unrivalled, and your experience must have proved to you the advantage of a well-contested combat in Shakespearian tragedies."

"I've an awful sore throat," croaked the Earl, from beneath a coarse worsted muffler of the shepherd plaid pattern, "and this damned east wind touches it up horribly. Perhaps, Mr. Mordon, I beg pardon, Comyns, did you introduce the gentleman as Mor——?"

"Gordon," interposed the manager. "Mr. Howard Gordon."

"Gordon! all right. I think, Mr. Gordon," resumed Goliath, "we had better cut out the dialogue and come to the blooming fight."

Thus appealed to, Mr. Gordon took a pull at the pewter pot ordered from the "Spotted Dog" for the refreshment of himself and the ladies, transferred his chimney-pot hat from his head to the table, and firmly grasping one of the iron hoop-handle combat swords, provided by Mr. Oldfield, prepared to decide "the dreadful lay" to which the future King Henry VII. pantomimically invited him.

One, two, three, under; one, two, three, over; Richard thrusts, Richmond parries; Richmond thrusts, Richard parries; Richard chops at Richmond's head, Richmond cuts at Richard's feet; then Richmond cuts at Richard's feet, and Richard chops at Richmond's head; now Richard lunges at Richmond's stomach, and Richmond returns the thrust at Richard's intestines. A pause! Richard now gathers up all his strength, and cuts at Richmond's head, crossing over as he strikes; Richmond returns the compliment with like absurdity of action, but, alas! sad to relate, the unfortunate Richard's sword not being held sufficiently high to protect his forehead from the blow, the *weapon* of his towering antagonist alighted with terrific



Mr. Schott Comyns introduces the Earl of Richmond

force about an inch above his left eyebrow, inflicting a gash whence the blood flowed in a copious and alarming stream. In an instant everyone had gathered round the prostrate monarch, whose condition made it at once apparent that his tyrannies and crimes would not be enacted on the stage of the New Strand Theatre that evening.

"Oldfield!" cried Mr. Comyns, as the fainting Howard Gordon was carried to a cab at the top of the court for conveyance to Charing-cross Hospital, "run to Perkins the printer, and tell him to get out a small poster directly (crown folio size will do), 'Theatre closed this evening, in consequence of an alarming accident to a principal performer.'"

And thus ended the New Strand Theatre "AMATEUR REHEARSAL."



THE SCENIC CLUB AND ITS DOINGS

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CHAPTER I.

Clubs: their Advantages and Privileges—Formation of the "Scenic"—Difficulty of Choosing a Title—Emblematic Coat-Button Suggested for Members: the Proposal Abandoned.

A GENERATION or two ago there was an aroma of aristocracy attached to the word "club." It somehow savoured of swelldom, and when you heard anyone speak of So-and-so going there to dine, or to meet a friend, you instinctively associated his dinner, if in the very early spring, with whitebait, lamb, and asparagus, washed down with wines of the choicest vintage, and expected the friend must have a handle affixed to his name, or, to say the least, was included in the census of the privileged "upper ten." A vision of some palatial building in the most fashionable quarter of the metropolis at once presented itself to your gaze, the entrance approached by a commanding flight of Italian marble steps, white as a snowflake, and guarded on either side by a liveried footman of Brobdignagian stature, with colossal calves to match, and features of defiant expression, surmounted with a periwig of lily white powdered horse-hair curls. The mansion seemed to be always located outside the radius of common, everyday life, and if, perchance, you had occasion to visit it on any particular occasion—say, to call on one of your intimate Court Circular acquaintance—to proceed thither on foot appeared as much a dereliction of decorum, as it would be to offer the "*Hansom*" cabby who drove you to its portal, anything

under twice the honorarium to which he was legally entitled. "Meet me at the club," somehow sounded like a mandate to throw aside the Bohemianism of your working-day garments, and assume for the nonce a vesture of the very best superfine ceremony. To be one of its members notified to the common herd your private or professional status, and expunged the nausea of commerce from your door-plate. It erased, as by magic, the simple "Mr." from your card-plate, and substituted "Esquire" at full length distinctively in its place. Your most intimate friend, after your successful ballot had been declared, and your installation become known, would pause ere he addressed you in the street as "Jack" or "Jim," albeit such familiarity had been his wont from childhood, and would substitute "My dear John," or, "Let me assure you, James," with the fustian ceremonial of a newly-elected parish beadle. In a word, there was an exclusiveness implied, and a prerogative attached to a clubbist which placed him outside the pale of inferior beings. In olden times, the working man or petty tradesman would pass his evenings at the "Grasshopper's Arms," or "The King and Cucumber," on the opposite side of the way, in the joint discussion of the latest bruising match and a fourpenny rummer of hot gin-and-water; varying such delights, in the sultry summer months, at some suburban tea gardens, with quoits or skittles, and the unvarying concomitants of pipe and pewter pot. To him, the daily or weekly newspaper was, so far as politics were concerned, a sealed book, nor was he a whit more anxious to exercise the franchise than are the chawbacons of to-day, whom the Radical tub-thumper would persuade you are dying for that privilege. His club was "the house of call" for his peculiar craft, and he knew it only by its simple, honest title—the public-house. He sought not to sail under false colours, nor to palm off his Paris diamond for a genuine Indian gem. Colleges and clubs he regarded as institutions for his betters, and was content to accept them as such, and to pick up the knowledge suitable to his station at the parish school, and take the amusement congenial to his taste at the village ale-house and the county town "statute fair." The ambition of the half-educated took a somewhat higher

flight, that soared as the seeds of learning struck deeper root; till the youth who had garnered up his limited stock of classic lore at boarding school, or under the guardianship of a private tutor, began to tower in his aspirations, and seek to emulate the amusements and places of resort of persons above him in the social scale. Then it was that the chess-board began to displace the domino-box, and the aristocratic billiard-ball to serve an ejectment on the plebeian nine-pin. The cosy "parlour" of the public-house expanded into the commodious "assembly rooms" of the Institution, and yards of rainbow-coloured "Brussels," dotted with "Salivarium" ottomen, usurped the place of littered sawdust, and circular japanned or yellow delfware spittoons. The frequenters of these places were associates of a literary institute, or members of an amateur dramatic society, and periodical meetings were now convened whereat to discuss the merits of the latest launched novel, or arrange for the coming performance of a legitimate five-act play.

With this general advance of intellect and expansion of brain, a corresponding change of name, as a field for its exercise, became a necessity. Troops of amateur actors had hitherto figured under distinctive titles. "Shakesperians," "Thespians," "Histrions," all companies more or less known to fame, we had had in abundance, while the term "Society" had been coupled with their exploits in every imaginable form of baptism. "The St. James's Society," "The Olympic Society," "The Strand Society," and so on, and so on, in connection with the name of the theatre or hall where the exhibitions took place; but, in their wildest dreams of theatrical immortality, the amateur performers of my young and roseate days had never attempted to aspire to the dignity of clubbists, and I believe I may congratulate myself on the luminous idea of first linking *that* distinction to the amateur player.

And now to christen my bantling. If Richard the Third, of hated memory, was imprudent enough, in a moment of excitement, to offer his kingdom for the temporary loan of a bay or brown undersized gallows, to replace the magnificent sixteen-hands "White Surrey," we are accustomed to

hear him order His Grace the Duke of Norfolk to groom and have ready for him at an unearthly hour of the morning, what would I not give, with due and deliberate reflection, and after having ineffectually ransacked my brains for several consecutive hours, to hit upon a melodious, euphonious, harmonious appellation, wherewith to bind in stage wedlock my embryo club? "What's in a name?" inquires Shakespeare, in the simplicity of his poet nature; but I would respectfully remind the Swan of Avon's ghost—for to exchange a word or two on the quiet with the "divine William" himself has long, long years ago, I fear, been past praying for—that when his gov'nor penned that oft-repeated quotation, he did not happen to remember, or perhaps found it convenient to forget, the equally-familiar aphorism, "Circumstances alter cases." Certainly it does not signify a bronze farthing in an affair of love, whether you apostrophize the wingless angel of your adoration as plain "Sal" or beautiful "Cleopatra"; but if the bum-bailiff, armed with a distress warrant, happens to put his man in on your (Jones's) ornamental walnut and coromandel, in mistake for his (Smith's) deal or very ordinary mahogany, the "What's in a name?" conundrum assumes an altogether different complexion. But no matter! "What's that to do with your new club?" I fancy the impatient reader exclaiming, and, acknowledging the justice of the reproof, and submissively bowing to the cry of "Question," let us hasten on. Well, then, I referred to a small volume of synonyms I owned, and searched assiduously under the head of Thespian, histrion, tragedian, comedian, harlequinian, and all the other polysyllabic parts of speech whose finals sounded catching and tintinabulary. Alas! my energy was unrewarded. Every word symbolical of the drama or its belongings appeared to have been used up, and the Lexicon of old Dr. Samuel Johnson was as barren and as bare as a newly-hatched chickabiddy emerging from its shell.

In this dilemma, I was walking down one of the lanes (I think it must have been "Drury," for towards "Fetters" I always entertained a natural antipathy, and with "Chancery"—redolent of law and stuff gowns—I had little sympathy at that time of day), when my eyes lighted on a flaming,

coloured poster, announcing the advent, in the course of the coming week, of an entirely new and original three-act drama from the pen of J. B. Buckstone, Esq., of the Adelphi Theatre, and which was to be introduced to the public at that charming house, with the usual stereotyped accessories of new dresses, scenery, and appointments. With the neophyte actor—and this rule, I fancy, holds good with amateur and professional alike—the matter of dress is a primary consideration. If the *jeune premier* (that's the new-fangled French term for the juvenile tragedian—bah! it makes me sick, these foreign choke-jaws—but you must go with the times, or you'll be voted an old fogey, and sent to the rear accordingly), if the—I can *not* write it—if the young gentleman before-mentioned plays a lover, he can hardly expect to succeed—at all events with the fair sex—unless he is unexceptionally dressed, and looks “nice.” If, on the other hand, it is his fate to enact the villain of the piece (and all pieces boast villains in their *dram. pers.* or how, I should like to know, could the moral be pointed, and virtue prove triumphant in the last scene?), it is matter of necessity that his clothes should be equally well adjusted to his figure, and harmonize in cut and colour with the dark, sinister scowl stage villains invariably put on with their paint and crape hair. But how to associate “costume” with a club? “Aye, there's the rub!” Again, was not such an alliance just a wee bit *infra dig.* to the Herculean walking-stick? True, there was the authority of Shakespeare himself for everyone giving due and proper consideration to his tailor—

“Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,”

says old Polonius to his son and heir; but, on the other hand, in the very next line we find Mr. Billy qualifying the recommendation, and expressly cautioning the young scapegrace against paying a visit to the masquerade shop, for he goes on—

“But not expressed in ‘Fancy’: rich, not gaudy,
For the apparel oft proclaims the man.”

Here, “Fancy” evidently points to the light fantastic toe, and is intended as a gentle hint to Laertes not to issue in

the dawn of morning from the entrance-door of last night's Bal Masqué in plum-coloured tights and richly spangled doublet and mantle. No ! (figuratively) we must doff the *costume* notion, and seek further a-field for the baptismal cognomen. "Appointments !" Somehow, I did not like the word ; there's a shoppy flavour about it. It sounds like a boy being installed behind a counter, and one almost expects to hear the amount of "screw" the governor is disposed to offer him for the first six months. No ! "Appointments" will not fill the required vacuum, and must obviously be sent, with the discarded "costume," to the right-about. "Scenery !" Come, this looks like business. Drama—scenery ; scenery—drama. There is evidently a connection between the two. You can't have a play without scenery, at least you *can*, but you don't ; and scenery without drama—well, of course *that's* possible ; but the excursion season has long passed away into history, and we are not now talking about Richmond Hill and a telescope. But "Scenery Club !" Pshaw ! Two substantives together ! That would never do, and, as a grammarian would put it, plainly belongs to the *objective* case. Stay ! for what was I sent to boarding-school, and what is it Dr. Muddlekinchen, D.D., the principal of the establishment, has been always endeavouring to hammer into my addled pericranium ? "Be sure that your adjective agrees with your substantive in gender, number, and case." The agreement—perfect cordiality, in point of fact, so far as I was concerned—as to sex and quantity, was as easy to establish as A. B. C., when once I had contrived to lay my hands on the two necessary parts of speech ; but it was to little purpose I should twirl round and round my substantive Indian "club," unless I could manage to light upon an adjective-magician's table, whereupon to deposit the elongated skittle at the conclusion of the ceremony. I am not a poet myself, but I am given to understand from those who are accustomed to take their little drops at the "Pierian spring," that the liveliest thoughts and inspirations of the Muse are those that strike the imagination most suddenly, and I presume it must have been some small portion of this Promethean caloric that descended upon my raven ringlets, when all at once it

beamed upon me (a kind of "de grande vitesse" or mental "Flying Dutchman") that this substantive "scenery," which had been haunting my imagination like Maskelyne and Cooke's phantom at the Piccadilly Hall, was capable of being transmogrified into the adjective "scenic." Here was a discovery! "*ευρηκα*" (I have found it!) I exclaimed aloud, which, as being my entire capital in the Greek language, I thought it as well to ventilate for the benefit of passers-by; and I forthwith hurried homewards at topmost speed, in order to cogitate, in the peaceful solitude of my little study on the four-pair back, how most effectually to launch the newly-christened bumboat. "Scenic Club!" I repeated over and over again, and at each repetition the partnership seemed to acquire additional strength and melody. There was a consistency, as well as a euphony, in the union; a consistency, because scenery—that is, country scenery, for here we drop the paint-pot and the coarse whitey-brown canvas of the theatre—includes shrubs and trees; shrubs and trees are timber; timber is wood—and "by this declension," to quote the loquacious old dotard Lord Chamberlain of the play, it follows, as a matter of course, that "clubs," being manufactured of the same pithy material as their progenitors, have a natural sympathy for that branch of the family forest whence they derive their existence, and are clearly entitled to regard the "brave old oak" in the relationship—to put it as distantly as possible—of a genealogical cater-cousin.

And now as to the euphony? What so dulcet, so soothing, so agreeably tinkling to the ear, as the variety of Arcadian sounds emitted, at the close of a fine summer's day, from the thorax of the woolly and downy-feathered inhabitants of the beautiful landscape before us? Listen to the note of the throstle—vulgo thrush—only *that* reminds one of a sore throat, and as such would be out of place in the dog days; drink in the mellifluous strains of the nightingale or the skylark; give ear to the screech of the jay, or the old-maidish chatter of the parti-coloured pie; and incline a tentative auricle to the caw of the coal-black old gentleman referred to by Macbeth, who, as light thickens, wends his way homewards to the rooky wood. Is there not melody,

modulated and attuned to every ear, in this orchestra of Nature? Does not one's pulse beat correct Greenwich time, and the human heart go pit-a-pat with chronometric precision, in unison with the harmony around us? We are cheered by the music of the song bird of the wood, and to a certain extent share its joy; humanized by the cheerful gregariousness of horse, cow, and baa-lamb, and recognise in that quality the social characteristic of our own nature. If awakened from the phantom of an early morning's idle dream, or aroused from the reverie of a midday foolish chimera by the shrill invocation of our old friend Catesby's village cock-a-doodle-do, we become reconciled to the nuisance by the reflection that idleness is the root of all evil, and grateful to Chanticleer for the lesson of industry he teaches us; and in our moments of extreme stupidity—and who, pray, amongst the best of us, can claim immunity from occasional attacks of that disease?—we hark back to the euphony of Creation's lower animals, and find sympathy with our mental condition in the inane bray of a jackass. Don't you be in a hurry, Mr. Cynical Reader, to condemn all this as nonsense, and cry out in a bluster of indignation, "This fellow's a lunatic!" It is the little tittlebat, remember, that wiggles about on the surface of the stream, and gets picked up for his pains; whilst the crafty, big barbel gropes his nose in the gravel at the bottom, and swallows his grub in comparative security. So now, just shut yourself up in your cellar, and commune with your thoughts for five minutes, and then, emerging from your hiding-place, own, with the candour of a gentleman, the consistency, the euphony, and the philosophy I displayed when I decided upon christening my new dramatic convocation, "The Scenic Club."

Having christened my baby, and dressed it becomingly in long clothes, the next thing, of course, was to take it out of doors for a walk, and display the finery; and it was in the following manner that this publicity was effected.

That history repeats itself we have been informed over and over again, and the present instance but adds an additional name to the long list of subscribers to that assertion. Messrs. Puttick and Simpson, the well-known art and

literary auctioneers, frequently offer to public competition—such is the phraseology of the catalogue—in their extensive sale-room on the first floor of their establishment in Leicester Square, the dramatic works of Shakespeare, and other poets of the Elizabethan era ; and it was in this selfsame building, known at the time of our story as “The West Literary and Scientific Institute,” that the celebrated Scenic Club first drew breath, and also offered for sale, to such stage-struck aspirants as could be induced to join its ranks, the distinction of acting membership, together with access to the extensive library (?) of the club, contained in an old-fashioned mahogany bookcase at one extreme end of the room, and consisting mainly of the works of the old dramatists then most in vogue on the stage, a few modern poets, sundry criticisms on the performers of the day, and a few odd volumes of antiquities more or less connected with matters theatrical. Paltry as such a collection may now appear, as the encyclopædia of a body of histrions seeking the bubble reputation as illustrators of the Immortal Bard, it must be conceded that the amateur actor of a former generation was not over given to those “Society” dramas wherein he had to figure in his everyday costume, and perhaps run the gauntlet of chaff and coarse badinage from some rival performer, or acquaintance whose purse was better lined, and whose wardrobe might be, from that fact, less in need of repair or renewal. Add to this, it would be useless to deny there is a charm attached to the tinsel and the gewgaws of the stage that you try in vain to extract from plain broadcloth or best Saxony. Your “dress” or walking coat may be fashioned with all the skill of Poole’s best cutter-out, and sewn together by the hands of his most experienced and painstaking workman ; the “kicksies” may fit *à merveille*, no bagging about the knees, no bulging in the rear, and the bottoms perfectly free from that elephantine ruck of superfluous material which, in the slop-made “breeks,” always overhangs the spat, and conceals from admiration the better part of your patent-leather ankle-jacks. All this to-rights-ishness, let us grant, is excellent in the Park, or in a crowded ball-room, where you can slink behind a tree or a

carriage in the one case, or, by mixing among the revellers, conceal your identity in the other, till the better-appointed swell—should such a curiosity happen to crop up—passes by, and you feel yourself once more at liberty to be “upon show ;” but when you are strutting your hour upon the stage, full in the glare of the treacherous footlights, and with every eye—male and female—fixed steadfastly upon you, it is then that the hour of trial comes ; it is at that moment that the conviction will force itself upon you, strive as you may to repel it, of the probable, nay, of the *actual* presence of some powerful rival in the front of the house, a gold medallist in the society of swelldom, who, lounging in the stalls or dress circle, with a diamond-studded shirt-front more exposed, and gloves fitting tighter, and therefore more uncomfortable (but no matter for that) than your own, still commands the advantage of exhibiting conspicuously to his immediate neighbours, his manly chest and undeniably filbert-shaped finger nails, and somehow contrives to participate in, if indeed he does not positively engross, the attention of the audience, of whom, for the nonce, you, and you alone, ought to be the sole and central figure. It is a fearful thing to have one’s importance discounted, as it were, under such circumstances, and to be forced to play second violin in that particular orchestra where you had fondly hugged the delusion you would wield the conductor’s bâton. But “*telle est la vie*,” as the Frenchmen say to the nude bathers on the beach of Boulogne-sur-Mer.

Now let us return to the club, for at present we have got hold of little more than the extreme end of the handle.

My immediate friend, Mr. Lemm, one of those bosom chums we value so in the unsophisticated confidence of youth, and who drop off, like the teeth out of a comb, as years roll on, and the patch on your crown becomes more pronounced and assumes a superior polish, hinted that, to be strictly *de rigueur*, the acting members of the Scenic Club ought to display some distinguishing mark of their dignity. Lemm professed the craft of a tailor, and now that the old scythe-bearer has unwarped my judgment, and laid open the commercial millstone to the optic of experience, I can

perceive the sly rogue's motive as plain as a pike-staff. He dilated on the picturesque appearance of the Metropolitan Police Force as they marched in single file out of Scotland Yard, to take up their allotted beats for the night; commented on the regularity and artistic impressiveness of their dark bluebottle uniform, and the starry sparkle of the row of Britannia metal buttons dotting, at stated intervals, their tumbler-pigeon-shaped breasts: plunged into frantic panegyrics on the dazzling effect of scarlet cloth when swathing the athletic models of Her Most Gracious Majesty's Household troops, as not simply inviting the attention of the fair, but actually compelling the respect of the opposite sex, contending that uniformity of design and colour in costume in all bodies corporate, be they civil or military, was a *sine quâ non*, and formed part and parcel of their high degree; and that for the members of the Sceoic Club to appear in mufti, and walk about the streets "in their habits as they lived," like ordinary mortals, was to make undue surrender of their newly-acquired status; and, in fact, to stifle the safely-delivered dramatic infant in its incipient swaddling clothes. I confess I was touched, though hardly convinced, by the force of my friend's oratory. There are subjects on which you might have listened to the late Earl of Chatham, or even to old Demosthenes himself, if you force me to be classic and insist on an illustration from the ancients, "from misty morn to dewy eve," and yet have paused, when the elocutionist resumed his seat, ere you admitted yourself talked down, and owned yourself a convert to the momentum of his logic. Lemm's address was of this *genre*. There was certainly a great deal *in* it, as well as a great deal *of* it; but somehow it did not seem to go, like the dart of the God of Love, straight to the heart's bull's-eye, and at the termination of the harangue, you found your mind wiggle wagging about, like a weathercock on a stormy day, uncertain whether to accept the odium of ridicule, perhaps of derision, and pop on the "cap and bells" like a zany, or, by shirking the livery, with its shoulder knots and hair powder, to subside passively into the common-herd nonentity, attracting no more observation from the out-of-door

world than does the feeble, worn-out pantomimist of the long ago, when the Christmas festivities are over, and the dusty holly, with its faded, shrivelled berries, and the pale-green mistletoe, with its withered, curled-up leaves, are taken from behind the looking-glasses and picture frames by the relentless housemaid, and pitched behind the destroying fire without compassion or regret. My mind played at see-saw for a short space, self-respect and an inkling for notoriety being alternately at the top of the plank; but the former eventually triumphed, and I flatly declined to take on street doublet and hose. Of course, this is a figure of speech, for the most enthusiastic among the members of the club was hardly rabid enough to don trunks, ruffles, and tights in a London thoroughfare, and would never have gone beyond the length of an outer garment of ordinary tone and texture, albeit "curiously cut," as Petruchio has it, or distinctively braided or embellished.

Thwarted in his professional hopes—for I stood at bay like a Spartan, and contested every inch of ground with the desperation of the Thane of Cawdor in the last scene, when he finds it is all U.P. with the witches' prophecy, and that nothing remains for him but to chance the hazard of the teetotum—Mr. Lemm attacked me in what I must be weak enough to admit was a vulnerable point. I had set my foot down—stuck it in the thickest mud indeed, as I fancied—against *any* distinctive mark, the minutest outward and visible sign of Scenic Club membership; but my dense mire turned out after all to be nothing but fine sea sand, whence it is as easy to withdraw your five toes as to imprint them, and the tailor, perceiving my vacillation as to the coat insignia, resolved to vacate his perch at the top of the tree, and see if he could not pick up a crumb or two about the root or lower branches. It was the Blue Ribbon Army business of the present day. Just a dot—nothing more—was needful to distinguish you as one of the cloth. Any one can abstain, if such be his desire, from "blue ruin" or "Sir John Barleycorn," quite as well by force of will or habit, as if he bedecks his breast with a square inch of sarcenet, and turns up the whites of his eyes like a parish clerk repeating the litany; but this proceeding invites

observation, and induces his fellow-men to regard him as the good young man of the song, and it is just on the cards that the goody-goodies will sympathize with the movement, and accord him a support they would withhold under other conditions. "If I can't sell my broadcloth," scililoquized Lemm—for I can see into his inner man *now*, as plainly as if he were sliced up and laid out in sections on the dissecting-table of St. Bartholomew's Hospital—"I must contrive somehow to dispose of the lining and trimmings." So he suggested the adoption of a coat button, to be uniformly worn by every member of the club—not a great, flaring, Lord Mayor's footman lump of metal, as large as a turnip, and as bright as a glow-worm, but an unobtrusive, quiet, modest little knob that, like a simple rosebud in an early spring bouquet, at once becomes the cynosure of every eye, despite the rivalry of its neighbours of the conservatory, who vainly combine to conceal its beauty and perfume by a union of scentless gaudy colour and meretricious display.

"A metal button of bronze, if you will, with a mulberry tree impressed on it," said the tailor, "is the very best and most appropriate thing we can hit on. A bust of Shakespeare would not do, it would seem too presumptuous. At the same time, *some* emblem, connecting in a manner the drama of his age with the performances of the club, is essential; and what more consistent than the mulberry tree, a cutting of which, you will remember, Cowper (this was my adopted theatrical name), the poet, planted at New Place, in Stratford-upon-Avon."

"The idea is a happy one," I replied, tickled at the notion, and falling into the snare with the docility of a dove. "There's very little of the tailor's goose about you, Jemmy Lemm."

"Come, drop the shop," said the snip, rather nettled, for his taste and his trade were as wide apart as the poles. "Don't let us have any larking while we are upon business, Cowper, if you please. Is the thing settled?"

"I suppose it won't be a very expensive affair?" I inquired, pausing at the foot of the venture, with the caution of a family mouse about entering the door of the wire trap whither the toothsome toasted Cheddar has enticed him.

"Pshaw! a mere trifle," he rejoined. "I know a young fellow who works at Webb's, the die sinkers in Drury-lane; he is a bit spooney upon me—not that I care for him a dump, he's only a working chap, you know—but he'll get it done for us at cost price. Is the thing settled?"

What objection could any reasonable being raise to such a munificent offer? Here was a man so wedded to the cause, as not only to waive all personal interest in its favour, but even propose to invoke the disinterested assistance of an outsider upon strictly economical terms. In a House of Commons where two persons constitute a quorum, the fact of the "ayes" being successful in a division is mathematically equivocal to the well-known *nem. con.* of that august assembly in St. Stephen's-square. The button question was carried on these lines, and in fancy, my friend and I could plainly perceive, looming in the daylight of popularity, an entire grove of verdant, bronze-green mulberry trees, flourishing in vigorous health on the histrionic bosoms of Scenic Club celebrities.

"By the way, Cowper," said Mr. Lemm, as I rose to depart from the little parlour in the rear of his tailor's shop in Tavistock-row, Covent Garden, where this conversation took place, "it would be as well perhaps to leave a trifling deposit with the fellow at Webb's when I give him the order for the die. He would not think of asking for it, I am sure, but I should not care to lay myself under an obligation to a chap in employ, and he arn't too well off, I expect. Have you got half-a-sovereign about you? It is just as well to keep these little matters square. Short reckonings, &c., you know the rest. I will put down the same amount, and we can debit the club with the quid."

I could boast no great profusion of these useful little coins at that time of day, but contrived to satisfy the demand by an all-round application to the pockets of trousers and vest; at the same time acquiescing in the tailor's sentiments about short accounts and friendship, with a levity of manner that would have induced anyone, not behind the scenes of my exchequer, to fancy it would only have very slightly inconvenienced me to pay off the National Debt.

I called at my friend's a few days after this occurrence to inquire as to the progress of the mulberry-tree shoot, and was told that it had been planted, and was growing admirably ; in other words, that a sketch was being prepared for our approval before the die was handed over to the engraver. Some days later on I was informed that "the drawing" was still in hand, and at the lapse of a similar period, I heard that the same *hand* was still grasping the work of art, with a tenacity of hold that promised little probability of release from its grip. Ultimately, a rough pencil sketch of some tree or shrub—it might be a mulberry or a bilberry plant so far as resemblance was discernible—arrived by post, with an intimation scribbled underneath, also in blacklead, that the die would be put in hand as soon as the "drawing" was returned as "approved." I expressed to Lemm just a hint of distrust as to the *bona fides* of the artist, but all doubts were at once set at rest by his suggestion that the design was possibly the handiwork of Messrs. Webb's assistant himself, in that individual's conscientious anxiety not to incur unnecessary expense by the employment of professional skill, and by his faithful promise to see his friend, and report progress to me in due course.

In the meantime, I had mentioned to some of my acquaintance how matters stood, and the subject got bruited about, and discussed among the few members of the club who, at this early stage of its existence, constituted its entirety. The advisability of adopting a button of fantastic design as "a badge of all our tribe," did not seem to meet with general favour, and was, in the opinion of the majority, a questionable policy, inviting chaff and derision. Its fate was eventually sealed, and the idea abandoned altogether, through the following impromptu, of which the wag of the party delivered himself at a subsequent meeting of the managing committee :—

"When the Scenic Club members Will Shakespeare essay,
It were wise to avoid ostentatious display ;
As for emblem distinctive—a mulberry tree
Emblazoned on coat—is all fiddle-de-dee.
If the club makes a *mull*—when the stage they first strut on,
The *bury* will follow—they won't want the button."





The Green Room of the Soenic Club.

CHAPTER II.

The Green-room and Company—Characteristics of the *Dramatis Personæ*.

BEHOLD the Scenic Club now fairly established, and in thorough working order ; every member has had his particular line of "business" assigned him. Let us take a peep into the green room and see whom we have there.

First there is the leading man—the swell of the show—who engrosses, or ought to engross, the principal interest of the drama's story. That is he resting himself on the settee at the back of the room, with a play-book in his hand. He is refreshing his memory in the last scene before going upon the stage. Just before him stands the juvenile tragedian, in earnest conversation with the low-comedy man, who is warming himself in front of the fire. He is paragon of all the virtues, and, by virtue of those virtues, cosmopolitan lover and beloved of all the stage heroines in existence. Practising attitudes before the cheval-glass, we have the heavy gentleman, chronic villain of the footlights, with a rooted antipathy to most of the other characters in the play, from some undefined cause not usually explained till the last scene, and frequently not very lucidly then. Fourthly, comes the first old man, and his character and conduct differ considerably, being mainly dependent on the style of drama in which he happens to be engaged. Should the piece be of a serious or domestic description, he is generally the parent of one of the amorous spoons, whom he treats with unnatural and unmerited barbarity through three or four long acts ; but being suddenly seized with a fit of contrition in the last short one, lavishes his benedictions right and left, upon everybody and upon every-

thing, in a manner strangely inconsistent with the reputation for remorseless cruelty which he has borne among the inhabitants of the village where he has resided, shunned and detested, for at least five-and-twenty, and often for a period extending to fifty years. If the play be of a mirth-moving tendency—but stay, is it not better to allow the first old man to have his after-dinner snooze, and awaken him when our call-boy summonses him to his place as an exponent of the Comic Muse? Next then, we have the walking gentlemen and utility men. Observe the nice distinction, if you please. The gentlemen walk, whilst the *men* adapt themselves to any contingency, and are equally at home on foot or in a vehicle; whether the carriage be a four-horse drag, and the “utility” man its aristocratic Jehu, or simply a shabby old night crawler, and he the boozy conductor of the knacker one usually finds attached to those conveyances after—

“The iron tongue of midnight hath tolled twelve.”

The first walking gentleman often finds himself obliged to set aside the suavity of demeanour one naturally associates with the title, and make his appearance as a relentless villain, the confiding friend and accomplice of the chronic scoundrel, merely saying “yea” or “nay” between the long set speeches of his colleague, and acquiescing in whatever villainy the cut-throat proposes with a bland geniality of disposition utterly opposed to his conduct towards every other person in the play, and totally at variance with the scowling, hang-dog eyebrows, and raven-black ringlet wig wherewith for the nonce he has disguised his naturally amiable countenance. “Utility” men are walking gentlemen of an inferior grade. They head processions, frequently hold military rank, and precede, with glittering, drawn sword, a file of half-a-dozen supers in scarlet uniform, who have been told off (out of sight of the audience) to arrest the leading man on the quiet, and march him off to the deepest dungeon of the adjacent castle-keep. They order their men about with the despotism of a Siberian governor; shout “Halt,” “Quick march,” “Eyes right,” “Order arms,” and all that sort of thing in a tone as nearly approaching a savage bull-dog’s bark as is possible of attainment by a

human being, and in humble imitation of the orthodox article, whom you can go and hear exercise the same rough oratory any morning you feel disposed to stroll as far as the courtyard of St. James's Palace, and with the additional inducement of having nothing to pay at the doors.

To come to the comic element of the *dramatis personæ*—for you must not suppose the votaries of Melpomene have it all to themselves, and wade through blood and crime night after night without a slight introduction of the *jeu d'esprit*. No, no ; nothing of the sort. For instance, when Sir Giles Overreach (the old playgoer will remember) is bully-ragging the artless daughter he professes so to love, and instructing her to adorn herself in her very best Sunday *robe décolletée*, in order to attract the notice of the wealthy young nobleman he designs to be her husband, is not the representative of the old curmudgeon obliged to submit to a coarse guffaw from the gallery folk, because the author of *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* insisted on making Justice Greedy interrupt the lecture, to ascertain whether his master would consent to sit down to dinner off a fine young deer that had not been roasted with a Norfolk dumpling in its belly ? Who that has played Sir Giles has not felt his dander rise when he finds all the dignity of his tragedy upset by this ridiculous and uncalled-for interruption ? *Mais, que voulez-vous ?* You must put up with it, it is very annoying, we know, and you feel perfectly justified in your own mind when, *sotto voce*, you consign the old dotardly Justice and his Norfolk pudding to the other side of the River Styx ; but as *you* are not Mr. Philip Massenger, and consequently not responsible for the text, all that remains to your philosophy is to grin and bear the insult, and endeavour, as soon as the magistrate's exit has left the field open, to win back, by the force of your eloquence, the attention of the audience so unceremoniously infringed upon. Justice Greedy, by the way, would be enacted by the first old man, and that enviable line of the dramatic craft cannot perhaps find a better illustration of what first old men in comedy do, or expect to do, whenever they are upon the stage.

It is their province to continually interrupt any other

character who has anything to say that is worth hearing. Other people on the stage, in what are known as "their scenes," may be regarded as intellectual jackals, whose duty it is to provide succulent and digestible food for the lion comique. His best jests are all led up to ; his smartest repartees prepared by the context of the previous speaker ; the laughs all fall to his share, and even the low comedian, whose cap and bells ought to confer upon him the prerogative of head zany, is obliged to chatter—

"With bated breath and whispering humbleness,"

whilst the first old man is before the "float," lest any of his "fat" should be lost through the selfish grimaces of his fellow-comedian. In fact, as the late William Farren is reported to have said of himself on the retirement of the celebrated Dowton, he is the "cock salmon of the market," and all his brethren of the sock must be looked upon as very small fry indeed.

We next approach the "low comedian" and the "second low comedian." You perceive there are degrees of folly as of wisdom, both on and off the theatre of life. The low comedian is a fool ; the second low comedian is a greater fool, whose penetration is not deep enough to discover the stupidity of his friend until the latter explains it to him. The explanation secures the titter or the roar of the audience in a relative proportion to the extravagance of the jest, and the low comedian thus becomes the recipient of the inanity of the second low comedian's nonsense as well as of his own. But there always exists a liberality of disposition, a commonwealth of generosity, between these merry-Andrews ; and, in order that the leading buffoon should not arrogate all the fun to himself, he handsomely permits his brother droll to interpolate the text with foreign matter, technically known as "gag," whereby a division of laughter and applause is obtained, enabling them, on retiring to their dressing-room, to congratulate each other on their success, and revel in the way in which "*we* knocked them."

But the "genteel comedian" of the company should not be left out in the cold all this while, because he is an indi-

vidual of superior pretension, second, indeed, only in importance to the first old man. To command absolute success, this gentleman should possess attributes that do not ordinarily fall to the lot of common mortality. He must be moderately tall, and the ownership of a good-looking countenance may be considered a *sine qua non*. If he represent the beau in an old comedy of the early part of the century, habited in black silk stockings and knee-breeches, with frilled shirt front, and ruffles concealing the entire backs of his hands; or if he illustrate a "masher" of the present day, sporting a shirt collar he can't possibly turn his head round in, and displaying a waistcoat cut so low down that it is matter of speculation how he contrives to keep it poised upon his body, and at the same time to support the flaming coloured handkerchief he has stuffed into one of its sides, it is equally essential that his appearance, the moment he sets his foot upon the boards, should attract and hold captive the gentler portion of his audience, and enlist their interest and sympathy in his adventures and escapades. From his first entrance till the final descent of the curtain, the genteel comedian is the pet of the petticoats; his courage and his gallantry are the theme of their admiration, and they follow the episodes of his career, and drink in the vivacious dialogue in which he greets his ruin and disgrace, with an enthusiasm and a rapture that no other character in the piece can command, until finally his devotion to the beauteous damsel of his adoration is rewarded by the fair hand he has pursued so persistently through good and evil report, imperilling, for its dear sake, life, fortune, and friends, and preserving inviolate only his honour and his love!

But it is not to be assumed that the genteel comedian passes the whole of his theatrical existence in an odoriferous atmosphere of bon-bons. Alas! he is oftentimes compelled to appear as the heartless representative of vice and profligacy, although embellishing his iniquities with such a *couleur-de-rose* tint that the audience is half tempted to speculate on the philosophy of adopting or condemning his failings, until the wary dramatist, ever-anxious to deliver an all-round lesson to society, and convince the world that wickedness is the

common property of human nature, and not a patented monopoly of the poor and lowly, exhibits his depraved nobleman (for the heroes of stage ethics are usually selected from the peerage) in so despicable and heinous a light that, despite his position and social advantages, you find yourself driven, for common decency sake, to give him the cold shoulder, and register your vote and interest on the side of honesty and the parish Union. But somehow or other, even when the genteel comedian is obliged to disport himself under such unfavourable conditions as these, he still contrives to retain, at his final exit, a certain amount of the sympathy and condolence he has excited throughout the play. How is this? you ask. He is well dressed, good-looking, and bears himself with the air of a gentleman. In that *must* lie the secret. There is—and, do what you will, I defy the most experienced laundress of good manners to wash out the moral iron-mould—an aromatic flavour about depravity and crime, when in the hands of the better-bred and well clad, that you seek in vain to discover if the criminal be poor and a denizen of St. George's-in-the-East.

The light comedian will complete the list of our company so far as its male constituent is concerned. He is an epitome of all that is gay, thriftless, and mercurial. His present and his future means of existence are matters alike indifferent to his care and providence. In pursuit of his lady fair, the indignation of the damsel's father, or the instructions of the mistress of the house to prevent his admission under any pretence, are no more barriers to his desires than would be a garland of hot-house roses to the escape of an enraged bull, should that animal happen to find himself so tethered. Be the entrance to the mansion never so sedulously watched, and its approach defended by the staunchest of mastiffs, the lover scales the wall adjoining the dog-house, if even so stuccoed with broken glass bottles as to render a cat in the neighbourhood a curiosity, without the slightest let or hindrance, and serenades his idol under her chamber window in the frostiest of nights, and in the brightest of moonlights, perfectly defiant of catarrh, and unapprehensive of interruption. Should the

situation of the farce demand his escape from the grip of the bailiff's man, generally supposed from his craft to be up to every move on the board, the light comedian contrives to effect an exit upon the simplest possible lines, and bounds through the folding-doors "in flat" with an elasticity and an audacity that completely dumbfound the "bummy," when he slowly awakens to the conviction that he has been done. It is only upon occasions when he resorts to a bribe, to secure the good offices of a housemaid, singing chambermaid, or the waiting woman in attendance, for he regards all the sex, if in employ, as alike open to a "consideration," that he exercises a prudence and a forethought a little inconsistent with his volatile character. Here the light comedian manifestly shows to advantage as compared with the Melpomenian corruptor of honesty and innocence. The cool, calculating tragic rascal rarely descends to arithmetic in money matters. He always carries about him in his purse the precise amount necessary for the bribe he contemplates, and hands it over to his accomplice in villainy as indifferently as though its contents were only so much Dutch metal. Some of these dramatic Rothschilds go the length of hurling their purses, bursting with bullion, at the feet of a scorned rival or a discharged attendant. Does not the Moor of Venice treat Iago's better half in this fashion? whilst the gardener's poetical son, Claude Melnotte, exercises an equal liberality when returning the whilom French Marquis his leather portemonnaie. And here we encounter one of those strange anomalies that beset us through life, as well off as on the stage. Whilst the thoughtful, circumspect wearer of the buskin flings broadcast around him the currency of the realm, the heedless, unreflective exhibitor of the sock doles out a shilling or half-dollar to the female attendant, supplementing the bribe with a small further instalment, should the original seducer prove incompetent for its office, or making up the deficiency with a kiss, or a compliment as to her good looks. But setting aside this little prudent inconsistency, the light comedian of a company is an awfully jolly dog, and lives on anything but bad terms with himself and the ladies.

The ladies ! Yes, for to pass the dear creatures by in silence would be to affix a slur on the gallantry of the dullest wielder of a goose-quill.

First, then, comes the leading lady, the partner in love, or in guilt, as the case may be, of the leading gentleman. She, like him, has the "Pope's eye" of the joint, and a very large proportion of the "fat" and choicest cuts besides. Next, we have the juvenile lady, younger, slimmer, and less rubicund than No. 1. As regards costume and appearance, you may put her down as the pick of the handicap, to be successfully steered to the matrimonial goal by the fashionable light-weight of the dramatic turf. She has to utter all the nice things we admire and consider so Parnassian in our youth, and pooh-pooh, or turn a dull ear to, when the moustache requires waxing, and the waving locks of bygone days begin to exhibit the white feather. In her turn, enter the first old lady, technically "old woman," only age looks so bad upon paper as to be open to objection, except when utilized as an advertisement in the *Era*, under the head of "Stage Requirements." First old ladies represent Duchesses, Countesses, Viscountesses, and all the other s's that go to make up the dramatic "Debrett ;" whilst second old women, as a matter of precedence, must be content to play second fiddle to their more fortunate sisterhood. Then comes the comic lady, whose vagaries are, for the most part, confined to the lower grade of society. Her representative should be obese and dumpy, for you cannot squeeze much of a guffaw out of an attenuated, lanky, wheezy female, with a horse-collar-shaped visage, carmine her nose and pencil-line her features as you will ; while the podgy, jolly, round-faced old woman, on whose gouty No. 8-shaped figure the most skilful of *modistes* would fail to effect a fit, is as brimful of cachination as the proverbial egg is of meat. It is customary to provide this lady with a cotton umbrella of the Mrs. Gamp pattern, and a riticule of dimensions long since discarded as a monstrosity of the feudal age. Lastly, but by no means least, we have the soubrette, or singing chambermaid, to whose fascination, loquacity, and chronic curiosity about matters wherewith she can have no possible concern, the audience

is indebted for no inconsiderable portion of its enjoyment and risibility. Why all chambermaids should be expected to carol like birds is beyond my ken, but that they claim this prescriptive right upon the stage is indisputable, and you might as well attempt to reap the reward of a well-spent life with a bill-hook, as to expect a dramatic chambermaid to make a bed or light the bath-room fire without the accompaniment of a *petit chanson*.

The roll-call of the Scenic Club company having now sounded, and every soldier having loyally answered to his name, our next proceeding is to set them on the march.



CHAPTER III.

Members of the Club meet to select opening Performance—*Merchant of Venice* decided on, and performed at St. James's Theatre.

THE Committee met several evenings at the Literary Institute in Leicester-square to organise an opening performance, and separated on each occasion, after much discussion, not unmixed with a little dissension, without arriving at any result. The lecture theatre rented by the club was unlicensed for the sale of wines and liquors, and smoking within its walls was strictly interdicted. It was warmed by hot-water pipes which, though diffusing a fair amount of heat, deprived it of the snug, cosy atmosphere a blazing coal fire imparts, and rendered the proceedings rather matter of business than amusement. It is useless to deny there is a geniality in "Wall's End," and a sociability about hot brandy-and-water, that the cleverest tactician cannot extract from iron hot-water pipes and lemonade, and hence every "Scenic" who had set his mind upon some particular favourite piece, and already, in his mind's eye, beheld himself habited in the glittering finery of its hero, stuck, with the tenacity of a pitch-plaster, to the drama of his choice, and pointed out to his fellow-clubbists its indisputable superiority over every counter proposition. From Mr. Selfish's point of view, every character in its three or five acts, was precisely suited to the peculiarities of the individual he had selected to enact it, and fitted into its place with the geometrical exactness of the zigzag-shaped pieces of wood in a child's dissected puzzle. Mr. Jenkins would look the old man's part to the life. Had Walter Tomkins desired a character to exhibit his aristocratic features and recognised military bearing to the greatest

advantage (W. T. had a nose of the Wellington mould, and a chest the shape of a cuirass), he could not by possibility have hit upon one, in the whole range of Oxberry or Cumberland, so singularly adapted to his style and figure as Major Popham Pontoon of the 4th Irish Indefencibles; whilst Tommy Jawkins' voice, heavy slouching gait, and slow, ponderous delivery were so minutely the characteristics of the villain of the drama—the Honourable Scrooge Scamp, that the author must surely have had him (Tommy) in his eye, as the unrivalled representative of his model scoundrel, when he drew so faithfully the idiosyncrasies designed to symbolise the Beelzebub of fashionable life. Selfish's logic would have been too convincing to withstand but for the singular fact of Jenkins, Tomkins, and Jawkins holding precisely the same views about the particular tragedy or comedy *they* favoured, as Selfish did about *his* bantling, and feeling equally confident with that histrion of his (Selfish's) ability for, and adaptability to, the peculiar character they had set aside especially for *him*.

To select an opening play, and to distribute its *dramatis personæ* satisfactorily among such opposing interests, appeared impossible, and the chairman ultimately proposed to convene a general meeting of the members elsewhere, and discuss the subject collectively with open doors. To give the gathering a social character, the Albion Hotel in Great Russell-street, then—and until the passing of the Act of Parliament which obliged its Boniface to close the doors as the bell of St. Paul's struck twelve, and despatch his Thespian votaries supperless to bed—the modern Pantheon, was decided upon, it being perhaps considered that the obstructiveness of the more contentious might yield something of its obstinacy, under the suasive influence of generous wine, and the soothing fumes of the weed, for whose introduction into this fair Island we give credit and “Thank you so much” to the gallant knight-errant, the hero of the dirty Greenwich puddle, and finally of the executioner's axe.

“Gentlemen,” said our old friend Lemm (secretary and treasurer *pro tem.*), on the night of meeting as above, “I am pleased to see so numerous a gathering, and anticipate

from it a satisfactory result. Before we proceed to business, it is necessary to nominate a chairman, and I beg to be allowed to do so in the person of Mr. Charles Gould. Will any gentleman kindly second that nomination?"

"I have great pleasure in doing so," said a sturdy, thick-set, sallow-faced individual of middle age, who, having only joined the society the same day, had presumably never set eyes upon the proposed chairman till that moment. He probably fancied it better to declare himself at once, and so give the assemblage to understand he had not parted with his subscription money in the morning to be regarded as a cypher when the time for action arrived.

A buzz of approval ran round the room, announcing the unanimous acceptance of the tailor's nomination, and Mr. Gould moved from his place to the head of the long table in the centre, and seated himself, as the presiding genius of the evening, in the old-fashioned Windsor arm-chair appropriated to that distinguished functionary.

"Before we commence," said the chairman, "and to prevent interruption to the proceedings, it will be better that gentlemen order what refreshments they require. Cowper, kindly touch the bell."

In answer to the summons a waiter shortly appeared.

"Stout and bitter," "Scotch whiskey hot," "Two pale brandies," "Three cigars," "Gin cold," "Sherry Cob—"

"Half a moment, if you please, gentlemen," interposed the attendant, and taking up one of the half-dozen quill pens and a sheet of paper laying before the chairman, he proceeded to write down the various orders as rapidly as his penmanship permitted.

The refreshments having been duly supplied, interruption from without strictly forbidden, and silence proclaimed by the little ivory hammer—the symbol of the president's authority—the chairman rose, and gracefully bowed his acknowledgments to the clapping of hands that greeted him on every side.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I am proud of the distinction conferred upon me by your selection of president this evening. The name of our new member who so kindly seconded Mr. Lemm's nomination is unknown to me, but

I feel not the less indebted to him for the honour on that account."

"My name is Waithman," explained the seconder. "Although only this morning elected a member of the club, I felt no hesitation, Mr. Chairman, in seconding the proposal of your secretary; as I recognised in you a gentleman of maturer years, and, by inference, of greater experience, than the majority of the members I see around me."

I winced instinctively as I caught Lemm's eyes at the conclusion of this harangue. They glared as revengefully as Zanga's, when that Sable Prince unbosomed himself to his victim in the fifth act. The wily tailor knew well enough that I had reckoned upon *Hamlet* being selected for our opening night, and piqued myself upon being cast for the Danish Prince, having played the character upon several occasions, long before the Scenic Club was formed, or even dreamt of. The truth flashed upon me; my enthusiasm for the mulberry-tree button had died out with the collapse of the scheme, and I had been imprudent enough to suggest to my friend, though up to now unsuccessfully, the return of my half-sovereign at his early convenience, and this was his revenge! Mr. Gould, who was a dozen years or more my senior, had been promoted to the pride of place, and, moreover, had discovered in Waithman, a coadjutor of at least equally long standing to assist him in ousting me from the pedestal of my ambition. Hamlet, skull in hand, glided from my vision into the distant future, much after the manner of his armour-clad governor on the platform of Elsinore, and I saw that I should be obliged to reconcile my aspirations to his rival Laertes, if still determined to don the sables of the play.

"As you are aware, gentlemen," continued Mr. Gould, as Waithman resumed his seat, "your committee have already had several meetings without arriving at any definite result. We must all admit it to be of the first importance that, in selecting our opening piece, we consult rather the ability of our recruits than their individual expectations. It would be fatal to the club's stability to allow the ambition of any gentleman to outweigh the general interest. We must therefore consent to sink our emulative aspira-

tions at the outset, and await fitting opportunity for their development."

I saw in an instant I was done. Gould was a prominent member of a Radical Spouting Club, holding its weekly meetings at a public-house in St. Martin's-lane, and thoroughly accustomed to debate, rounding his sentences with an oratorical power to which I could never assert any claim. From the moment of the Scenic Club's formation, it was a foregone conclusion, with the majority of the members, that the hero of whatever drama was selected for the initial performance would have one of us two for its representative, and I had managed to convince myself, without any excessive amount of persuasion, that I was destined to be what the "cheap Jacks" of street merchandise designate "the happy man."

"Mr. Cowper suggested to me," said Mr. Lemm, casting a withering look at me across the table as he spoke, "that the tragedy of *Hamlet*, if carefully cast——"

"I am perfectly sure, Sir," interrupted the chairman, with the blandest and most conciliatory of smiles, "Mr. Cowper, on reflection, will not advocate the acceptance of any piece, and of *that* one especially, so very exacting on the undeveloped talents of a newly-formed society. His good sense and experience must show him the necessity, and convince him of the difficulty, of adequately filling the numerous characters in such a play."

At this, Waithman shook his head negatively right and left with a vigour that threatened the immediate dissolution of the Prince of Denmark; and the younger portion of the auditory, who had no particular fancy as to character, so long as the costume was showy, and they were allowed to sport a feather or two in their head-gear, soon caught the infection of their elder leader, and set their heads wagging with a unanimity that cried as loudly as pantomimic action could do, "No, no, no."

The tailor worshipped at Thalia's shrine, and affected the embodiment of first old men. He was not nice as to the particular character, so long as it was first chop. Sir Peter Teazle, Sir Anthony Absolute, Sir Robert Bramble, Lord Ogleby, or any similar leading personage in the

catalogue of the favourite comedies of the last century, who have all the "fat" to themselves, and are upon the stage in nearly every scene, was quite good enough for him.

"Shall I be out of order, Mr. Chairman," he said, respectfully, endeavouring to convey by tone and manner that whatever piece was chosen was indifferent to him, so long as the arrangement was satisfactory to the company, "shall I be out of order if I venture to make a proposal?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Lemm," answered that functionary. "We shall all, I am sure, be delighted to hear your proposition, feeling, as we do, that your consideration of the general interest will prevail with you over any personal inclination."

Though there was no mirror opposite to where I was seated, I know how my countenance lighted up at this "tip," as I saw in it the same fate awaiting Sir Peter Teazle and Co. as had befallen my unfortunate "glass of fashion and mould of form." Lemm's time had surely come, and I rejoiced accordingly. "At least," thought I, "we shall go to the stake together."

"I fancy, gentlemen," continued the tailor, glancing blandly up and down the long table, as if to pave the way with the softest of felt for the reception of the ward of his guardianship, "that Sheridan's comedy of the *Rivals* would be by no means a bad opening piece. The 'business' is simple and fairly well known, and I think we might manage to cast it tolerably decent among our most experienced members."

"The *Rivals* is worn threadbare!" exclaimed Mr. Waithman; "they are doing it at the 'Garden' three times a-week. Everybody has had enough of the *Rivals*."

"I am afraid, Mr. Secretary," said the chairman, "your proposition is scarcely a happy one. As our friend observes, the piece *is* very stale; and I question the policy of inviting comparison, by our crude efforts, with such a cast as that of the 'Garden.'"

"Nobody would think of *comparison!*" exclaimed the tailor; "that's too ridiculous, Mr. Waithman, is it not?"

This rejoinder was evidently intended for the chairman, but, unwilling to exhibit any animus at the president's oppo-

sition, though his blood was boiling to resent it, he addressed his query to the newly-made member.

Mr. Waithman affected not to notice it, and suddenly busied himself in politely passing the lucifer stand to a gentleman nearly asleep on the opposite side of the table, whose half-smoked cigar lay beside him.

"I am not so sure of that," remarked Mr. Gould, adroitly coming to the rescue of his seconder. "It is not what the public *should* do, but what they *will* do, that we have to fear. Amateurs as we are, audiences are apt to forget that fact in a theatre. You see it is incumbent on us to dispose of the tickets at some sort of price to meet the expenses; and people who pay for their amusement, however trifling the sum, are not over-squeamish in their ill-nature if they fancy their money foolishly thrown away. Farren's Sir Anthony, all of us know, is faultless, and as well known as Temple Bar, and though I am confident our worthy secretary would do his very best to——"

"Believe me, Mr. Gould, I was not considering myself in the least," interrupted the tailor, "but I feel confident that Faulkland is in your hands, Mr. President——"

"My dear Sir, said that gentleman, "we must leave Faulkland entirely out of the question. If we conclude for the *Rivals*, Faulkland, as a matter of course, would be assigned to our friend Cowper; because I should not consider it right, or, indeed, *just* (strong emphasis here) after the trouble he has bestowed on the organisation of the club, and which, let me assure him, no one present appreciates more highly than myself, to put in any claim to his prejudice. The character, I know, *is* strictly in my line, but that has nothing at all to do with it. But, Mr. Lemm, you will concede that Sir Anthony is *the* part in the play, and I would put it to you candidly, though I confess the task an ungracious one, whether you feel sufficient confidence in yourself to entrust the interest of the club, and its future success—for after all, to look the thing in the face, *that* is what it really comes to—to your rendering of the character—in the face, too, of the criticism our opening performance must necessarily be exposed to. If you are self-reliant enough to take on your own shoulders——"

"I am perfectly certain, Sir," interposed Mr. Waithman, who perceived he would be left out in the cold if the *Rivals* were accepted, "after your remarks, put with such delicacy, our secretary will not put the meeting to the pain of rejecting his proposal, but will see the judiciousness of withdrawing it."

Lemm was decidedly in a fix. He had nominated the chairman to his post in the confident hope of receiving that individual's support in the discussion he knew must follow, but discovered too late he had raised a Frankenstein whose devilry was too potent for its parent.

"I am entirely in the hands of the meeting, Mr. President," he began, blushing up to his ears, "and should certainly not have hazarded any suggestion that appeared prejudicial to the interest of the club; but if you will take the sense of the meeting——"

"I really do not think, Mr. Secretary," interposed the chairman, "we need put you to the unpleasantness of explanation. Your generous consideration for the good cause is known to, and appreciated by us all. You withdraw the *Rivals*?"

"Hear, hear, hear!" shouted Mr. Waithman, seizing an empty tumbler by his side, and rapping it violently on the table, to drown any further remonstrance from the tailor.

"I was about to remark, gentlemen——," Mr. Lemm commenced, determined not to abandon Sir Anthony Absolute without another struggle.

"Chair!" exclaimed Waithman, renewing his attack on the table with the glass. "Chair, chair!"

"I fear, Sir," said Mr. Gould, "we shall hardly arrive at a result to-night if we do not make quicker progress. Your considerate withdrawal of Sheridan's play leaves the stage clear for another proposal."

"But if you will allow me, Mr. Chairman, one moment to explain——"

"Sit down, sit down; chair, chair!" from half-a-dozen voices in chorus.

It was plain enough the tailor's perseverance would have to go unrewarded. Seeing his case hopeless, he resumed

his seat pettishly, and buried his confusion and his face in a pewter pint pot.

"Mr. Chairman," said a gentleman, with a ruddy, low-comedy visage, and a voice not unlike poor Buckstone's, "may I say a few words?" Without waiting for the permission requested, he continued, "I agree with all you say, Sir, as to the importance of a good start. What's wanted is a square, all-round play, where everybody that can act can have his go."

A titter ran round the room at this paradoxical maxim, and the homely phraseology of the speaker.

"No larks, gents, if you please," continued Mr. Fitzgerald, perfectly unabashed, "we're on business. It's no use fixing on a play with a lot of fellows in it who know nothing. Young 'uns must stand down till they've had a little practice. Now what I should call an out-and-out pick is the *Merchant of Venice*. Charley could do—I beg your pardon, Mr. Chairman, I forgot myself for the minute. You play Shylock admirably, and have done it lots of times, so we're right as a trivet for the leading part."

When Mr. Fitzgerald let slip the familiar "Charley" I was not slow to discover there was a conspiracy in the camp; nor did the apology that followed the *lapsus* reassure me. Anxiously I scrutinized every countenance to see how the proposition was received.

"Mr. Chairman," said Waithman, desirous of clinching the matter off-hand, "I beg leave to second Mr. Fitzgerald's nomination. Setting aside the immense advantage of your own experience in so prominent a character as Shylock, I fancy the *Merchant of Venice* will afford the club an opportunity of economizing its expenses that should not be lost sight of by a young society. I have the pleasure of Miss Cobham's acquaintance, the daughter of the late celebrated tragedian, and have little doubt I could induce her, as a special personal favour, to play Portia for us. Her name, on our opening night, would be an attrac——"

Here the chairman and Mr. Fitzgerald went into such an ecstasy of delight, one would have imagined the brightest feminine star in the theatrical firmament had rejected a lucrative engagement at the National Theatre, specially to

favour the Scenic Club with her services as Belmont's wealthy heiress.

"How could we cast the *Merchant of Venice* most effectively?" inquired the President, thoughtfully, regarding the comedy as already accepted, and imagining himself in his gaberdine, with the merchants on the Rialto.

"You, Mr. Chairman, would, of course, do the Jew," said Fitzgerald, driving home the only nail left unfastened in the lid of Mr. Hamlet's coffin.

Mr. Gould nodded his head affirmatively, and to me that obeisance was more expressive than even the immortal shake of the late Lord Burleigh's, for with it disappeared, in the wake of the Prince of Denmark, the Jew's gaberdine, his knife, scales, and the pound (avoirdupois) of Antonio's flesh for which he was so rapacious.

"We may pass that, *I think*, gentlemen," suggested Waithman, in allusion to Shylock and his proposed representative, and he glanced around him with a satirical smile, intended to put the matter beyond question.

Three young noodles, gathered in a knot round the fireplace, whose dramatic aspirings soared no higher than the occupation of a crimson cloth-draped bench in the Italian Courts of Justice, in the "Trial Scene," habited in scarlet cloaks and ermine tippets, as magnificoes of Venice, here chimed in a vigorous "Hear, hear," one of the triumvirate rising from his seat, the more conveniently to perform a rattan on the table with his walking-stick, as indicative of the uncompromising adherence of himself and friends.

Waithman knew well enough that his turn stood next on the roll for preferment, and pressed his foot suggestively on Fitzgerald's boot, as the cue for action.

"I am half afraid, Sir," pursued that gentleman, turning his back to the "Sir," and staring earnestly in the faces of all present to induce a general assent, "I am half afraid, Sir, we're in a bit of a fix about Bassanio and Antonio. Mr. Cowper, I fancy, is hardly heavy enough for the Merchant, and if he plays——"

"Mr. Cowper, as a matter of *right*, would do Bassanio," interposed the chairman, "and I have no doubt, from his experience as a lover (a titter, of course, at this sally), will

render a good account of himself in the part. Mr. Waithman will *look* Antonio well ; and I feel no jealousy will be excited by the selection of a new member for so important a character."

"New member ! Come, that's a good 'un, Charley," exclaimed Fitzgerald ; "why none of us have——"

"Order, order ; chair, chair !" cried Waithman. "I am surprised at you, Mr. Fitzgerald. I should not attempt, for an instant, to stand in the way of any gentleman who has a prior claim as a member of the club from its formation."

"But I'm certain nobody in our lot could do it half so well," cried Fitzgerald. "Young Forbes is our only man in that line, and he's such a lath of a fellow, it would puzzle 'old clo' " to find a pound of meat in his carcase."

This joke proved more potent than half-an-hour's argument. It settled my friend Forbes' claims then and there, and that Mr. Waithman would lend Charley Gould the sum of three thousand ducats, in their relative positions as Antonio and Shylock, was as certain, from that moment, as that the bell of St. Paul's, at no distant period, is destined to strike twenty-four o'clock.

As soon as the laughter indulged in at poor Forbes' expense had subsided, the chairman, having proclaimed "silence" with his auctioneer's hammer in the usual way, proceeded—

"It seems, gentlemen, that the *Merchant of Venice* meets a certain amount of acceptance."

"General acceptance," vociferated Fitzgerald ; "general acceptance."

Waithman could not, with any show of decency, echo the precise words of his friend, so he compromised his acquiescence with a sonorous "Hear, hear."

"Well, general acceptance, let us say, then," repeated the president. "It only remains for me now, gentlemen, to go through the formula of putting it from the chair, in the usual way."

"Hadn't we better proceed with the cast of the other characters ?" suggested the tailor, who had not spoken since the collapse of his favourite, *Rivals*, but realized the fact

that the *Merchant of Venice* was *un fait accompli*, and so turned a favourable eye upon Launcelot Gobbo for himself.

"I think, Mr. Secretary," replied the chairman, "if the members decide to accept the *play*, we may leave the details for future consideration."

This was the old story of the shipwrecked money-lender, who, having gained a boat from the sinking vessel, and taken on board his client's deeds and cash-box, pushed a plank towards his exhausted companion, and congratulated himself on being his preserver.

After some further slight discussion, the question was put to the meeting by the chairman, and the *Merchant of Venice* was accepted, by a fair majority, as the opening performance of the Scenic Club.

"Alas, poor Cowper!" I soliloquized, apostrophizing my disappointment, *à la* Hamlet with the skull—for the Dane, in his long black cloak, velvet hat, and funereal plume of feathers was ever uppermost in my mind—"and has it come to this?" Here was I, the founder of the feast, who had borne the heat and labour of the day, and considered myself seated in the tragic curule chair—

"Firm as the stately oak

Which fiercest hurricanes assault in vain!"—

suddenly hurled from my pedestal by the machinations of the crafty old chairman (whom my friend the tailor had raised to the presidency) and his confederate, Fitzgerald—the low comedian—with the assistance of the unknown mushroom member of the morning—Mr. Waithman. Had not I played my favourite—Hamlet—several times, with applause, to say nothing of the crooked-back tyrant, Othello, Iago, Shylock, Petruchio, &c.—all Shakespearian heroes—not to mention Werner, Virginius, Sir Giles Overreach, Sir Edward Mortimer, and hosts of other leading characters, in nearly every Amateur Dramatic Society that had existed in London for the last half-dozen years? Where would be the Scenic Club now but for Cowper? that egotistical young tragedian would very much like to inquire. Why, to him it owed its existence. But for his christening, its very *name*, like that of the disconsolate young lover in

the song, concerning whose *nom de baptême* we are requested to observe a respectful taciturnity, would never have been heard ! But *sic transit gloria*, as the street arabs now write in their copy-books at the Board schools. The fiat had gone forth, and Bassanio—and *only* Bassanio—it was the writer's fortune—he begs pardon, he means his fate—to play.

I set about studying the part with my characteristic determination to do, as the Yankees have it, my "level best" with it, and looked forward to higher things in the future.

It was not until close upon the eve of the performance, which took place at the St. James's Theatre in the spring of 1847, that the secret of the *Merchant of Venice* being fixed upon as the opening play of the Scenic Club leaked out. Fitzgerald, the low comedian of the company, was the husband of Miss Cobham, and that young lady, who subsequently adopted the stage professionally with some success, was desirous of an appearance as Portia. Waithman—an assumed name—turned out to be Fitzgerald's brother-in-law, and had been induced to join the club for the sole object the triumvirate had in view. He was but an indifferent actor, although he had had several years' provincial experience as a professional. Gould played Shylock moderately well, as, indeed, he did most characters when fairly master of the text, though this essential to success was not with him an every-day occurrence. The performance, as a whole, was a creditable one for an amateur company crudely collected together. I had my revenge upon my whilom chum, the tailor, desirous as he was to be first old man. The character of Launcelot was cast necessarily to the low comedian, Fitzgerald, and my friend of the "goose" and scissors had to disport himself as his blind father, old Gobbo, with his thick walking stick, wicker basket, and dish of "property" doves.



CHAPTER IV.

Club Performances continued—*Damon and Pythias*—The Plot of the Play.

IT would little interest the reader of to-day to chronicle seriatim the various performances of the Scenic Club. They took place every second or third week during the autumn and winter seasons, generally at such one of the minor theatres as was procurable on easy terms, the St. James's, Olympic, Strand, or Sadler's Wells being usually in the market at frequent intervals. When neither of the above was accessible, the Royalty in Dean-street—then a private theatre known as Miss Kelly's, and later on as the Soho—was the scene of action, and could its walls but imitate the example of "Snout the tinker," the representative of "lime, roughcast, and stone," in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and assume the faculty of speech for awhile, many are the tales of "righte merrie conceits" they could discourse with glib and truthful tongue. Of one of such incidents it will presently be our hint to speak, but as "order is heaven's first law," we cannot do better than follow the celestial canon, and narrate a laughable episode of one of the club's representations, which took place at the Strand Theatre, on Wednesday, 4th April, 1848.

The *pièce de résistance* was Banim and Lalor Sheil's play of *Damon and Pythias*, and to make the situation "where the fun comes in" thoroughly intelligible, suppose we treat the reader to a descriptive

PLOT OF THE PLAY.

The scene is laid on classic ground, and the date of the action so remote, that it will be sufficient, for the purpose

of dramatic chronology, to generalize it as the toga toggerly era.

Dionysius has been elected King of Syracuse, and hailed as such in the senate house of that classic city. Of course, like most stage monarchs who come to grief in the last act, he is a tyrant, and as such his election to the throne and sceptre is strongly opposed by Damon.

This latter gentleman, as a matter of course, is a demagogue, a Trafalgar-square Bank Holiday orator of the classic era, who would make you believe he lives for everyone in the world but himself, and is the disinterested champion of freedom, staunchly devoted to public virtue and rebel law; an advocate of what he considers—or, at all events, of what he *says* he considers—"the people's rights"; and a friend to everything and everybody who desires to upset order, promote revolution, and oppose, by every possible means at his command, the powers that be. We must give him credit for the best of motives in his anxiety to do all this, and not hanker to go behind the scenes of his heart, and see how the cat jumps when no one is looking on. Indeed, you are asked to judge harshly the Syracusan criminal law, which sentences him to death at a very short notice, in consequence of an ineffectual attempt he has made upon Dionysius's life, that individual's bright Brummagem cuirass having turned the point of Damon's bit of steel, and rejected the kind offer of "a freeman's legacy," which are the words wherewith the demagogue accompanies the blow that he aims at the tyrant's heart. Damon is immediately seized by the soldiers—a couple of supers introduced into the Syracusan House of Commons—not to listen to the debate, but to separate the combatants, should any of the ancient Parnellite party happen to be on the Opposition benches, desirous of wielding the shillalah, and settling the argument in the Hibernian fashion, by force of arms. As soon as Damon is guarded on either side, and further attack rendered impossible, Dionysius—as master of the situation—rates the demagogue in precisely similar terms to those the "varlet" employed against him when *he* was elected cock of the walk. He does the heroic, and gives it him in this style—

"We reserve

This proud assassinating demagogue,
Who whets his dagger on philosophy,
For an example to his cut-throat school,
The axe—and not the sword. Out of his blood
We'll mix a cement to our monarchy.
Here do we doom him to a public death!"

Chains, and the usual metallic rattle, follow necessarily, and in order to bring matters to a crisis, and prevent any morbid sympathy being aroused, and a petition started soliciting Royal clemency, the tyrant pops the extinguisher on every ray of hope, by giving orders to his soldiery for an impromptu execution, as soon as the tools can be got ready; stalking off the stage, as cool as a cucumber, with this assurance to Damon of his impending fate—

"Damon, thou hast few moments left for life."

The overthrown demagogue has a soft place about him; nay, he has a couple of soft places—a wife and a son. These parties are resident in the suburbs of the city, and he begs they may be sent for by the "Express" City 'bus (they are quicker than the Underground Rail, though the stifling atmosphere is much the same in both), and be permitted to take leave of him before the fatal hour arrives. The tyrant does not seem to see it, as the phrase goes. He has earned for himself the stigma of despot, and is determined, as he has been cast the unpleasant *rôle*, to make the character a study, and enact it to the life. He refuses, and now nothing remains for Damon but to pop his head on the block, without the opportunity of presenting the Lady Hermion—his wife—with a lock of his hair as a parting souvenir.

Now comes the pith of the story. Damon has a friend, one Pythias, a soldier, who is something more than a chum, and may be best described, in the language of the school-room, "as a regular brick." He is more than ordinarily "spoony" upon Calanthe, a Grecian maiden of the gentlest type, whom he is about to lead to the Hymeneal altar as soon as ever the wedding dress is completed, and the white silk bonnet, trimmed with orange blossoms, can be obtained from the hands of the Syracusian Bond-street

milliner. Pythias, while doing the tender with his *fiancé*, appears rather uneasy about his friend, having a kind of second-sight foreboding there is a screw loose somewhere; and having gained Mademoiselle Calanthe's permission to run and see what's up, he rushes into the identical street through which Damon is being conducted, vigilantly guarded, to the strains of the softest music, from his dungeon to the place of execution. The guards, crossbows and all, are, however, powerless to prevent him, all unarmed as he is, from getting quickly at his friend, and the latter, with little palaver, informs him of his fate, adding that he has pleaded unsuccessfully to Dionysius for half-a-dozen hours' respite, wherein to visit his suburban cottage *ornée*, and embrace his wife and dear little boy for the last time.

Pythias, who is as good and generous as he is brave and truthful, cannot understand a denial under such pressing circumstances, and declares he is off to the palace at full speed, to offer himself as prison hostage for his friend, until such time as he returns in the evening. To save the scene-shifters unnecessary exertion, Dionysius comes in at the nick of time, and Pythias prefers his suit to him, assuring him the return of Damon, to take his place on the scaffold at the appointed hour, is as certain as quarter-day. The tyrant is dumfounded, as well he might be, at such friendship, but determines to test the *bona fides* of the offer, and graciously grants the request of the soldier, whereupon the chains are taken off Damon by the super rank and file, and slipped on to Pythias, who is then and there marched off to his dungeon, to a few bars of the same soft music as introduced his friend to us five minutes ago.

A new idea of life, and the obligations and reality of friendship dawn upon the king, and he straightway resolves to procure one of those long black stage cloaks, through the opening folds of which everybody can perceive the garments of the wearer underneath, except the individual most immediately interested in discovering them, and (thus perfectly disguised) visit Pythias in his confinement, and tempt his vaunted honour and so forth, by proffering him the means of escape before the fatal prison bell announces the hour for ascending the scaffold. As to the return of Damon

before the sun goes down, to take his friend's place at the block, he regards that as utter bosh, and no more expects the realization of the demagogue's promise, than you do to find alive, inside the travelling caravan, the six-legged sheep or double-headed kangaroo, whose fac-simile, the booth proprietor assures you, "on his honour," is painted in rainbow colours on canvas outside the show.

Damon, freed from his fetters, thinks it absurd to dilly-dally about, expressing maudlin gratitude, so, simply squeezing the hand of his friend, and uttering with suppressed sobs, "very many thanks, old man," he issues an order to his faithful attendant, Lucullus—who is standing at his side expressly to receive it—to pop the saddle and bridle on his favourite nag in two two's, and rushes off at the prompt wing to mount the animal out of sight of the audience, sceptical perhaps (as a tragedian, and not quite *au fait* at the Circus business) of his equestrian talent, and not wishing to risk the loss of his dignity, by coming down a "cropper," in his Roman shirt and sandals, in full glare of the footlights.

While Damon is on his horse and his journey to the St. John's-wood retreat of his wife and child, Dionysius repairs to Pythias' cell, and having commanded the "slave" who attends him to unbar the door and get out, he puts on a little "side," and informs the prisoner that he is a retainer on the staff of the tyrant, and has accidentally discovered, through a word incautiously dropped by the "guv," that that Prince of blackguards has determined upon the sacrifice of his life, to which purpose he has despatched a score of inferior scoundrels upon Damon's track, to intercept the return of that honourable man at the expiration of his leave of absence upon urgent private affairs.

What's to be done now? Dionysius goes on to assure the soldier that he is so touched by his devotion, and "urged by my pity for such noble friends," and, moreover, being desirous of quitting the service of such a fiendish employer, as soon as his month's notice expires, that he has come there for the express purpose of aiding him in his escape; and thus he generously offers his protégé the means of effecting it.

"I have provided in the port of Syracuse
A good, quick-sailing ship: yonder she lies,
Her sails already spread before the breeze."

By this it would appear that His Majesty of Syracuse was connected with the shipping interest of that city, and extensively engaged in trade; for we cannot stretch the imagination so far as to suppose that his "flunkeys"—one of whom the speaker represented himself to be—had such enormous perquisites as would enable them to purchase, and keep in going order, such a tight little craft as the poet has described above. In this respect, Dionysius probably initiated the practice of the English nobility of to-day, the *crème de la crème* of society, who consider it no disparagement to their order to appear as proprietors of "Hansom" cabs; to advertise "best Wall's End" at "lowest cash prices," guaranteeing the minerals as "perfectly free from slate and white ash," and containing 224 lbs. avoirdupois "full weight" in each sack; not to mention the Pickford business of portering home from "the Stores" grocery and chandlery, and descending to any petty dodge, whereby to touch more "siller" and keep down expenses at home. But this by the way.

Pythias rejects the magnanimous offer of his unknown visitor. "We try the depths together!" he exclaims, by which rather vague observation, he desires to convey to the front of the house his determination, come what come may, to remain true to himself and his pledge, and trust to what may turn up in the course of the afternoon.

By this time Damon has arrived at his suburban villa, and Mrs. D., who expects him home in time for the five o'clock tea, is discovered in the garden, with her boy, awaiting the arrival of Papa. The child has scarcely left the lawn, to greet his father's entrance at the front door, when the latter bounds in, bearing his offspring in his arms, the little one having found just time enough, before Damon's double knock fell on his ear, to gather a pretty garland of flowers from the conservatory in "flat." Husband and wife embrace, and the billing and cooing one remembers seeing on the reverse of the William and Mary coinage is illustrated to perfection. But soon

"A change comes o'er the spirit of his dream," and he appears fearfully down in the dumps. In vain does his wife endeavour to cheer him, and request him to invite back to his wan cheeks the roses of his youth. The truth must out. He tells her how matters stand ; of Pythias' noble friendship, and that it is compulsory he should cut the leave-taking short, and hurry back to Syracuse to the rescue of his friend. Naturally enough, Hermion implores him to remain ; to break faith with the warrior ; to turn tail, as it were, and allow the gallant Pythias to see it through. "No, no ; not for Joseph," replies the patriot ; it would never do for him to turn apostate to his own doctrines, and repudiate that honesty of purpose he has been upholding all his lifetime to his fellow-men. He declares his fixed intention of leaving without further delay, whereupon Hermion faints in his arms, and he calls aloud to a faithful servitor, who is hard at work at a flower-bed close by, to take his mistress from his embrace, and deposit her carefully, "this side up," on a conveniently adjacent garden seat. Soon as this is done, he passionately kisses his little orphan, adjures him to be a good boy to his poor mamma, and rushes from the stage to mount, as he supposes, the noble animal his whilom slave Lucullus has been minding for him all this while at the garden gate.

Now Lucullus, the freed slave, is affectionately attached to his master, and, resolved to preserve his life, he has taken upon himself the knacker's prerogative, and despatched Damon's Pegasus to join the equine majority. He fences with his governor somewhat at first, as, knowing the demagogue's lofty sense of honour, he is afraid to let the cat out of the bag ; but truth, like a cork, must come to the surface, and he is ultimately obliged to confess the deed.

And now ensues one of those clap-trap scenes, in which the tragedian, gifted with healthy lungs, and with plenty of "go" in him, revels ; as it is all "fat," and presents a powerful comparison with the intense pathos of the preceding scene, when the major domo is parting from those of the family circle he is credited with holding most dear of every object on this side of the Metropolitan necropolis.

Damon, like the Liberal member for Birmingham, dis-

dains all argument, and is as deaf as the proverbial post, to each and every of Lucullus' reasons and excuses. He realizes only the fact that the nag is *non est*, and he therefore without the means of getting back to the city. In vain does Lucullus plead for mercy, and entreat his master to spare his life as a *quid pro quo* for his own. Damon is determined to settle him there and then. He seizes him by the throat, informs him that "the eternal river of the dead" is a shorter cut to perdition than the bridle-path to Syracuse, and affords the audience some notion of his Samsonian endowments in the pentameter line,

"I'll throw thee with one swing to Tartarus,
And follow after thee."

The pair go off struggling desperately ; Lucullus strongly opposing the path at the cross-roads indicating by the finger-post "short cut to Tartarus across the fields ;" and of course the cheers and "bravos" of an excited audience follow them as the act-drop descends.

As they say in the penny nouvelettes, "we now approach the bitter end ;" although, in this instance, the catastrophe of the story has in it more of the syrupy than the bitter twang. The scene represents the public place in Syracuse where the naughty people of that fair city underwent the extreme penalty of the law. There is the prison at the back of the stage, with its heavy iron gates and ponderous portcullis. On the O. P. side we have the scaffold, covered with black cloth (of course) with the steps ascending to it similarly draped. The executioner, axe in hand, his visage covered with a visor, which visor renders that visage invisible, is posed close to the block, awaiting the command of the officer in charge of the prisoner to perform his dreadful office. All is silent as the grave, except a very pianissimo wheeze from the violins in the orchestra.

Pythias is now led forth from his dungeon, his face nicely powdered, and both his cheeks pencil-lined, as a proof of what terrible mental suffering will effect upon the human countenance, even in the short space of half-a-dozen hours. There is a legend of some enthusiastic representative of this character having gone the length of exchanging his raven locks of the previous act, for an iron grey wig of

an altogether different pattern, but this may be condemned as carrying the effects of grief to within a hair's-breadth of improbability. Necessarily, for stage effect, Pythias' betrothed—the heart-broken Calanthe—is stationed just outside the gates of the jail, so as to be ready to receive him in her arms on the instant, whilst her mother who, by his untoward fate, is deprived of the satisfaction of hereafter sustaining the affecting rôle of mother-in-law, attends her poor child in her bereavement, and materially assists in piling up the agony. The parting between the young people is heartrending, and any attentive listener might hear the “oh! my's” and the “dearee me's” of the errand-boys and factory girls in the gallery, at the further end of the street. The lovers are, however, torn asunder as soon as the fatal hour is announced as having arrived, despite Calanthe's passionate allusions to the well-known eccentricities of clock dials, and her persistent assertion that fully two minutes remain before it is incumbent on the man with the watch, to shout out at the top of his voice, “Now, my lads, Time!”

The audience are aware, quite as well as Damon himself, who is standing at the second right entrance, with dishevelled hair and his face as white as a counterpane, ready to rush to his friend's rescue as soon as he hears his cue, that the faithful fellow will roll in, half dead with excitement and exhaustion, in the very nick of time; but still they hold their breath, which is more than they can do with their sympathy, when the critical moment arrives, and the true-hearted Damon staggers madly across the stage, prostrating himself, breathless and fainting, within half a dozen yards of the tyrant's feet. He is raised up tenderly by a couple of supernumeraries, specially told off for the purpose, who have been drilled, and admonished over and over again to be careful what they are about (for it is ticklish work for these gentlemen, who are, so far as my small stage experience extends, the stupidest creatures in the world); and having regained his perpendicular, he gazes confusedly around him as if to inquire what it all means, and assure himself whether the whole thing is merely a fantoccini puppet-show, or a Madame Tussaud's real

Chamber of Horrors. The sight of poor Pythias mounted on the scaffold, the executioner, the axe, the black cloth, the solemn toll of the prison bell, and, above all, the awe-stricken attitude of "the whole strength of the establishment," recalls him to himself, and with one of those strong hysterical stage laughs—of which, to be thoroughly successful, the representative of Damon should hold a very extensive stock, be a gold medallist, in fact, of the histrionic *alma mater*, he rushes up the scaffold steps to his friend, and bestows on him such a cuddle, as recalls to the memory of all the old spinsters present what a terrible mistake they must have committed in their youth, in not having accepted *one* of the numerous offers which, they are perpetually reminding their friends and acquaintance, poured in upon them by the gross from eligible young men of that epoch.

As soon as Damon has recovered his wind, which he does whilst the audience is engaged in applauding his "ha! ha! ha! ha! ha's!" he relates the manner of his arrival and the incidents of the journey. It appears that, while dragging his old slave Lucullus along the Tartarusian-road, he espied a quiet traveller "bestriding a good steed." Without stopping to inquire the bagman's destination, or taking into account his convenience, he rushed upon him and peremptorily commanded him down from the saddle—the Jack Sheppard business in point of fact. The traveller slightly objected, but Damon goes on to inform us that he would not be denied, and as a hungry tiger clutches his poor prey, he sprang upon his throat, and so effected his discomfiture. To illustrate the *modus operandi* of this highway robbery, he seizes Pythias' windpipe, and shouting "Thus, thus, I had him, Pythias!" nearly strangles the warrior in his anxiety to show him how he managed to save his life. As a necessity, the grateful Pythias excuses the garotter in thankfulness for his perservation, and the faithful friends again embrace, doing the "ha! ha! ha!" business this time in concert.

The story is told. Dionysius throws off his disguise mantle, discovers His Majesty, and stands confessed. He is so touched, moreover, by this display of honour, friendship,

and all the best qualities of human nature rolled into a lump (beg pardon, into *two* lumps) in the persons of Damon and Pythias that, though previously a tyrant of the most pronounced stamp, with a heart as inflexible as a flat-iron, he presently becomes as ductile as a mackintosh wrapper in the dog-days, and pardons the twin brothers of fidelity and honour. The friends embrace again—this time for the last time; the populace at the back of the stage, who have witnessed the affecting scene nightly for the last three weeks, shout, “Hurrah!” and “Life and Freedom!” with that perfect unanimity referred to by “Puff” in the *Critic*; the audience applaud lustily; the green baize curtain descends rapidly; and the fat old woman in the crowded pit, anxious to dispose of her wares before the commencement of the farce, inconveniences everybody, by the rough business manner in which she thrusts herself and fruit basket through its occupants, shouting out at the top of her voice, “Ginger beer, bill of the play, bottled ale and stout, oranges, nuts, and lemonade.”



CHAPTER V.

Damon and Pythias at the Strand Theatre—The Dressing Room—Incidents of the Performance—A subsequent Repetition of the Play, and *début* of Mr. F. B. Chatterton, as Pythias, frustrated by Damon Breaking his Leg—The Lessee's Apology for the Accident.

LET us hark back to the performance of this romantic drama by the Scenic Club, the playbill of which is now before me, its date April 4th, 1848.

The club had long ceased to rent the Lecture Theatre in Leicester-square, and its weekly meetings were held at a Tavern in the Strand adjoining the Adelphi Theatre, known as the "Hampshire Hog," tenanted by the celebrated comedian Benjamin Conquest, for upwards of twenty years the proprietor of the "Grecian," in the City-road, and father of the present unrivalled pantomimist, Mr. George Conquest, of the Surrey. This gentleman was our stage manager, superintending all rehearsals and performances, instructing us in the "business" of the play, and affording the amateurs the advantage of his long and varied experience by every means in his power. However, when a classic drama was to be represented, the compliment was paid me, as the leading man, of directing the business of such scenes as I was engaged in, and teaching the supers any necessary details immediately connected with myself. In fulfilment of these duties, I had been kept on the stage of the Strand Theatre at the final rehearsal of *Damon and Pythias* (the day of performance) from eleven o'clock in the morning till nearly six, when it was time to doff the broadcloth of the street, and assume the fleshings, cachmere shirt, and calico toga of a Syracusan senator. During all these hours I had partaken of no further refreshment than a penny bun, and a glass—well, it might have been perhaps a *short* pint—of Barclay and Perkins' best XXX. It goes without saying that I was as much "a hungered and athirst" as it is possible for any enthusiastic

young tragedian to be whose body and soul are alike absorbed in the coming display.

Damon and Pythias, as bosom friends, would naturally attire themselves in the same dressing-room ; and by the irony of fate, added to the fact of this room being the largest and most comfortable in the Theatre, Dionysius and his " minion " Philistius, who follows him through the play like a poodle dog, found it convenient not to carry their animosity beyond the prompter's box, but to " pal in " with the faithful friends, and cast in their lot with the best accommodation.

It was a cold, cheerless night ; the equinoctial gales of March having somehow been far awa' at the proper time of arrival that year, and only reaching the metropolitan terminus by a late train at the beginning of April. There was a small register stove in the apartment, and a hundred-weight of coals had been sent for in the morning, and instructions given to the hall porter to kindle a d——, no, a bonny, bright blaze, and get the place well-aired and cosy by six o'clock at the latest. As a reason for not having carried out the order, the official declared he had not seen the charwoman all day long, and that he could not leave his post till late in the afternoon, when upon applying a match to the fagot, such a volume of smother issued from the damp grate, and long unused chimney, that he was obliged to pour a small Niagarian cascade on the carbon, to prevent the arrival of a manual from the neighbouring Fire Brigade Station. A windy, soaking night ; a draughty, cobweb-decorated, fireless dressing-room ; an empty stomach ! And all for amusement ! What is it the Scotchman says in the play about " the labour we delight in," the medicine bottle, and rheumatic shoots in the biceps ? Pshaw ! Poetry must knock under to the unfurnished larder ; the bowels, like the visual organ, must be fed, and when " there is that within which passeth show "—*i.e.*, *nil*—it is above all things necessary to negotiate the intestinal canal.

" Warde ! " I exclaimed to my friend Pythias, who was already dressed, and seated, pipe in mouth, with his legs swinging in the air, upon the carpenter's bench arrangement which borders these dressing apartments ; " I must have

something to eat before I go upon the stage. I have had nothing all day."

"Send over the way for a sandwich," suggested my thoughtful twin brother.

"I would not stuff myself, Cowper, if I were you," chimed in Dionysius, who had put away three-quarters of a pound of rump steak, and a similar weight of potatoes in the middle of the day; "you won't be able to act if you cram yourself now."

"I don't care," I rejoined, disregarding the tyrant's advice; "I must have something solid. I am positively famished."

"How about a nice hot chop and potatoes?" inquired Philistius, who certainly evinced much greater sympathy with my starving condition than did his overfed master, the King.

"Capital!" I acquiesced; "the very thing. Will you mind ordering it for me, Gunstone?"

"With pleasure," answered my kind-hearted enemy, opening the door as he spoke. "Here, boy, you're wanted in No. 1 dressing-room. Make haste."

In answer to the demanded "boy," a very old, decrepit, half-tipsy supernumerary made his appearance.

"What is it, gen'l'men?" demanded the future Syracusan soldier; "there ain't no boy here, 'cept the call-boy, and he ain't come yet. Is there anything as I can fetch for you?"

"Exactly," said I; "that's it. Run over the way to the 'Spotted Dog,' and order me a mutton-chop—a good large one, mind—and tell them to send it over, with some potatoes and a pint of stout, the instant it is done. Be sure it's a big one, and smoking hot. If they've no potatoes ready, never mind them—I can't wait—I'll have some pickles. Off with you, and tell them to make haste. Vanish!"

"All right, sir," exclaimed the leaden-footed Mercury, and away he hobbled on his errand.

Fully half-an-hour had elapsed, and I was getting desperately impatient, for the call-boy had knocked at the door, with the intimation that the overture was "on." I had

divested myself of every particle of clothing, except my "Blucher" boots, which I retained to the last for warmth, and was drawing on my fleshings preparatory to assuming the shirt and toga, when a sharp rat, tat, tat, was given at the door, and, in reply to the usual invitation to "Come in," a dapper waiter, with a tray in his hand, and something on it under a shining tin cover, stood by my side.

"The chop, eh?" I exclaimed, hastily. "All right; put it down; it's for me."

"One and tuppence, if you please, sir," said the masculine Hebe.

"All right."

"Must have the money, sir; don't leave nothing at the theayter without the money."

Imagine Damon, to whom the entire democratic population of Syracuse entrust the enfranchisement of their political rights, and the preservation of their homes and birthrights, being refused "tick" by the scullion of a common pot-house for a miserable fourteen D.

There was, alas! no help for it; it was, "No song, no supper," so, realizing the necessity of dubbing up, I rose from my seat, equipped in Nature's modest garb, and hurrying to the chair whereupon my clothes lay huddled in a heap, began fumbling about for the needful in the pockets of my coat and trousers. At last I lighted on some silver, but no copper currency was forthcoming.

"Have any of you fellows got any halfpence?" I demanded.

"How much do you want?" inquired Philistius, who had shown himself my friend previously by suggesting the cutlet.

"Only twopence," I replied. "Can you lend me as much?"

"There you are, old man. I don't want an I.O.U."

"Here, fellow!" I exclaimed, tragically—I had nearly dubbed him "Varlet," in the torrent of my wrath—"here is your money," and I handed him the sum-total, with the words—"Now, go!"

"Please to remember the waiter, sir," and he held out his hand for the tax.

"No, you insulting wre-t-ch !" I roared. "Be off !"

The terms of the notice to quit presented rather a homely contrast with the dramatic "wre-t-ch" of the previous moment, but one can't be always upon stilts, and time was getting short.

"Get out of this !" said Philistius, who still stuck to me like a leech.

"Cut it, old chap ; it's no go," added the tyrant, as a rider to the order of his underling.

The waiter stared round the room with a significance that showed a thorough contempt for the ancient Greeks ; and, muttering a hurried soliloquy, of which the more salient points were "shabby humbugs," "seedy snobs," and "duffing actor blokes," sulkily withdrew from the classic presence.

"Overture's just over, gentlemen !" shouted the call-boy, rushing in at the door as the waiter sauntered out, and followed by a large tortoiseshell cat ; "you've only three minutes, gentlemen. Dionysius and Philistius, left, first entrance," and having executed his commission, he skipped away as nimbly as the chamois of the Alps.

"Behold us here !" exclaimed the future monarch of Syracuse, in mock heroic, whilst Philistius, thrusting his tongue against his cheek *à la* Grimaldi, announced his readiness with "Here we are !"

The departure of the tyrant and the President of the Senate House to fulfil their duties at the footlights, left Damon and his faithful Pythias, the latter still occupied with his calumet of peace (and tobacco), the sole inmates of the dressing-room, except the cat and the assistant dresser, who was waiting to aid me in the adjustment of my fleshings, and to put the finishing touch on the graceful set of my toga.

Whilst I was engaged in exchanging my Northampton "crab-shells" for the senatorial sandals of Greece, and to gain time for the quiet disposal of my mutton-chop without bolting it, as the boa constrictor does the rabbits at the "Zoo," the dresser busied himself in making fast at my back the body fleshings, and connecting them, by string and button, with those of my nether extremities. When

completed, I presented a fac-simile of the Achilles statue at the entrance of Hyde Park, minus the sword and the shield.

"Nathan!" I cried, "hand me over the shirt, and get the toga ready, if you please. I had better finish dressing before I commence on the chop."

Nathan, of Tichborne-street, was costumier to the club, and his dresser's name was Charles, generally familiarized into "Charlie;" but I preferred to retain the cognomen of his employer, as better suited to the dignity of a blank-verse play.

"If I was you, Mr. Cowper," rejoined the man, "I'd tackle my supper before I put on my dress. You're sure to mess your toga. I don't see as how you can help to."

Thus advised, I advanced to the bench whereon lay the tray, and the toothsome delicacies of the "Spotted Dog" commissariat, and quickly removing the helmet-shaped tin cover, and seizing the knife and fork by its side, I commenced an attack on the mutton-chop in thorough good earnest.

I had scarcely got through a couple of mouthfuls, and was wabbling about a lump of potato, so scalding hot as to render swallowing it an impossibility, when Philistius, having finished his first scene, re-entered the room, and gave vent to a shivering "wheugh."

"How's the house, Gunstone?" I inquired, in inarticulate accents, for which imperfect elocution I hold the steaming vegetable accountable to this day, and with an expression of agony in my face inducing the idea I was a sufferer in the hands of a dentist.

"Beg pardon, Cowper; what d'ye say?"

I repeated the inquiry with somewhat more of distinctness, and somewhat less of grimace.

"Pretty middling. They are dropping in tolerably sharp now. By the time you are on I expect we shall have a crammer. It's horribly cold on the stage," he added, with a repetition of the "wheugh," "so I've come down here for my hat. I'm not on any more in this act." With this he reached down his chimney-pot beaver from a peg on the wall, and, sticking it on his head a-kimbo, proceeded to light a cigar.

A loud hammering at the room door was heard at this

instant, evidently the result of its contact with some heavy wooden substance, and, in response to Philistius' command to "open locks, whoever knocks," in walked a rather stout young gentleman of middle height, encased in a thick rough cloth top coat, buttoned up to the chin, and carrying under his left arm a huge walking-stick, with an enormous knob at the end, obviously the instrument that had produced the banging referred to.

This individual was a particular chum of Gunstone's, and not at all theatrically given; indeed, he ridiculed dramatic performances altogether, whether professional or amateur, and denounced actors in a body as "a lot of stupid mummers;" but he visited the dressing-room on this particular occasion at Mr. G.'s especial invite, "just to pop in for ten minutes," and see what fun was to be had behind the scenes.

"Good evening, sir," said this youth, addressing Pythias, who was still seated on the bench, swinging his legs and smoking his pipe.

The gallant warrior, without leaving his seat to return the civility, merely bobbed with his head a familiar "How are you?" and extended his mouth to its utmost capacity to allow the escape of the cloud.

"I'm afraid, Jack," added the new comer, speaking to his friend Gunstone, and staring at me in my fleshings devouring my chop, "I'm a bit in the way here. I'll be off, old man."

While venting this apology, he vainly endeavoured to suppress a titter that was quickly developing into a roar. He had never witnessed any similar scene, and the absurdity of the situation tickled him.

"Damon's called," roared the call-boy, quite out of breath from his haste, and flinging open the door as he spoke. "Stage will wait in less than five minutes, sir."

"Damnation!" I exclaimed, thrusting into my mouth a piece of the mutton before the impious emphasis had well died away, and hurling to the floor a Roman soldier's helmet, stuck on my classic robe to prevent it falling off the drum it was placed on. "Nathan, for God's sake, be quick with the toga!"



The Dressing Room of the Scenic Club.

The dresser had left the room some minutes since unnoticed, but was quickly recalled by Philistius, who all but upset his interloping friend in his anxiety to open the door. "Charlie" was thoroughly up to his work, and, seeing the necessity for haste, threw the classic shirt towards me with more dexterity than politeness. It was over my head in an instant, and my nudity thus hidden from the vulgar gaze of a non-theatrical outsider. The toga followed like lightning, and Nathan's assistant adjusted the folds with the rapidity of a pantomime change. I was dressed!

"Don't you go yet, old fellow," entreated Philistius of his sporting friend, for such the stranger turned out to be. "I'll send the chap out for some brandy, or would you like a bottle of Guinness's brown 'fiz' better?"

"Nothing for me, Gunny, thanks. This sort of thing ain't much in my way. Hoyles, the 'Spider,' puts the gloves on to-night at Ben Caunt's; it will be a treat; I would not miss it for a quid. So I'll say ta ta, old man."

Whether the visitor to the Champion of England's boxing-saloon retired then and there, or was persuaded to remain and partake of the proffered refreshment, must ever be shrouded in the mystery of past events. I heard no more than the invitation, and the seductive reason given for its refusal.

It is pleasant to chronicle the fact that, by an almost superhuman effort, as the penny-a-liners have it, I contrived to save a "stage wait," and with it the inevitable "goose." Within three minutes of the call-boy's summons, the patriot of Syracuse was fully equipped in his snow-white senatorial dressing-gown, and waiting collectedly at the right first entrance of the stage, ready—soon as the prompter's whistle sounded the change of scene—to stalk bareheaded into the streets of the Capital, and explain to the audience the pitiable condition of public morality in the city; letting them into the secret of the measures he was concocting—on the quiet—for the improvement of a

"Corrupted and voluptuous populace,"

and unfolding generally the radical programme he proposed to put in force to provoke a revolution, and make himself

boss of the show. This has always been, and probably will always remain, the demagogue's bill of fare. In the good old times, as it is the custom to dub those historical eras we know little or nothing about, Mr. Wat Tyler, John Cade, Esq., Sir Thomas Wyatt, *et hoc genus omne* turned their attention to rebellion; the real object they had at heart being their own individual advancement and aggrandizement; and as history, we are told, like echo, repeats itself, the same unselfish ("bar one," as they say on the Turf) love of country, propounded in the bunkum oratory of needy and seedy patriots, maybe heard any Bank Holiday, or summer Sunday afternoon, provided the weather be reasonably fine, in this present year of grace, round the "Reformers' Tree" in London's beautiful Hyde Park.

Everything progressed swimmingly, and "all went merry as a marriage bell" till the end of the second scene in act iv., when an incident occurred that upset the gravity of the audience, and imperilled not a little the success of that act's final scene.

Damon, it will be remembered, rents a snug little suburban box just outside the Syracusian radius, where his wife and child are rusticated in the garden, awaiting his return home from business in the city; and thither he repairs, when released from captivity by his hostage Pythias, to take a last farewell of his dear ones. The situation is a telling one, and in pursuance of my Hymeneal troth plight, to let my better half "go snacks" in all my worldly possessions, and stand in generally in any "bunce" that fell to my share, it had been arranged between Miss De Burgh (Hermion) and myself at rehearsals, that the act drop should not descend rapidly upon Damon's exit and embrace of his child, leaving his wife still in a swoon on the garden seat, under the watchful eye of the faithful old digger; but as soon as the applause which would necessarily follow my efforts had subsided, Mrs. D. should slowly revive from her syncope, and gaze around her with that idiocy of expression we have most of us exhibited some time or other in our lives, when awakening from a siesta induced by a too familiar intimacy with the vinous produce of our dear friends of the castanets and plum-coloured "smalls."

As soon as she realized the dreadful solitude of her position, severed from every tie she held dearest (here the agony is piled up to the altitude of a domestic Ossa), she was to rush to the centre of the stage, fall *on* her knees, and *over* her child there, and embrace him in a paroxysm of hysterical sobs, to pianissimo music and a slow curtain. We may perhaps be pardoned informing the ignorant in theatrical phrases, that the pace at which the "drop" is lowered at the conclusion of an act, is regulated by the requirements of the situation, and is technically known as a "slow" or "quick" curtain. Miss Mandlebert, the late popular actress of the Grecian Theatre, then a girl of very tender years, represented Damon's son and heir, and had been absent from all rehearsals except the last one on the morning of performance; she had therefore not been sufficiently instructed to remain in the centre of the stage, where poor papa had kissed and left her, until the arrival of "mother dear" to soothe and repeat the cuddle; and on Damon's exit, looked innocently round the house, as if uncertain what to be at. The Lady Hermion was too experienced an actress to recover from her fainting fit until such time as the applause had thoroughly ceased, and while she lay prostrate on the garden seat, the child had discovered, lying by her side, a heavy cluster of black ringlets that her mamma had added to her natural locks, in imitation of the magnificent head of hair of Mrs. Sarah Allen's advertisements. In Damon's last passionate embrace of his wife, these embellishments had somehow slipped their moorings, and lay, as yet unobserved by the audience, within a few feet of their late proprietor's flowing robe; little Miss Mandlebert, presumably tired of waiting so long alone, ran quickly up to her stage parent, and stared inquiringly in her face, as though to ascertain if she still slept; then, picking up the ringlets, she held them up, full in the gaze of the house, as high as her tiny arm would permit, and stroking the still swooning Hermion's cheek with the other hand to arouse her, exclaimed, in accents as distinct as those of a practised elocutionist, "Look, Miss De Burgh, you've dropped your curls!"

Hermion still swooned on; and the order for a "slow

curtain," which the lady had been so careful to impress upon the prompter, being scrupulously carried out, the drop descended, as in duty bound, amidst the roars of the delighted audience.

As may be supposed, it took Messrs. Damon and Co. all their time, as the saying goes, to play back the more facetiously inclined in the front of the house to an attentive and serious mood. However, we succeeded more than fairly well, and despite this untoward *contretemps*, I look back to the entire representation as among the most successful of the Scenic Club's efforts. *Damon and Pythias* was repeated, with nearly the same cast, on several subsequent occasions at different theatres.

Anent this play, yet one little anecdote more.

In the early autumn of 1852, the Royalty Theatre, then called the Soho, was leased by Mr. Charles Gould, to whose dramatic eccentricities I have had occasion to refer more than once in the course of these reminiscences. A benefit had been organized by the committee of some charitable institution whose name I do not retain, to take place at this theatre, the play selected by them being *Damon and Pythias*. One object of the performance was the introduction to the stage of Mr. F. B. Chatterton, so many years lessee of our National Theatre, who was to make his *début* in the character of Pythias, and I had been fixed upon to play my old favourite, Damon. This was in my courtship days, and I had driven my present better-half down to Hampton Court the day before the intended performance, to partake of one of those nice little dinners young lovers enjoyed so much, and continue to enjoy, for aught I can tell to the contrary, at the King's Head Hotel, opposite the Park, and adjoining the Palace gates. Returning home through Hampton about six o'clock, that witching hour in September when the sun is just withdrawing his golden beams, and the balmy air of twilight breathes peace and spooneyness to hearts that love, I contrived, by staring in my sweetheart's eyes instead of looking where I was going, to bring the off-wheel of my dog-cart in contact with the curb of the pathway, and the sudden jolt served me as Banquo's apparition did the valiant Macbeth, and "pushed us from our stool," deposi-

ting the Syracusan patriot of the morrow night in the middle of the road, with a compound fracture of the right leg. As I could not be removed to London, my future good wife obtained for me a temporary hospital at the house of a small builder hard by, where I lay on my back for eight weeks. The next morning Mr. Gould was informed of the accident, and advised to procure a substitute for the damaged Cowper; but not being able to light upon any one studied in the character in the short time at his disposal, and Damon being one of those parts it would be ridiculous to read from the book, he determined to return the deposit-money for the rent of the theatre, and to close the house for the night; this he effected thus. Two enormous posters were affixed to the entrance-doors of the pit and boxes with these words—

ROYAL SOHO THEATRE.

There will be no performance this evening, Damon having accidentally broken his leg.

“*Accidentally*, quotha, Master? A righte merrie conceite i’ faith, to fracture one’s limb just for the fun of the thing.”



CHAPTER VI.

A Medical Acquaintance—The Chemist's Shop—Individuality of Christian Names—The "Doctor" speculates on the Turf; Non-success and subsequent Difficulties.

THE Scenic Club had now existed over six years, averaging, acting and honorary members included, close upon a hundred subscribers; and though new members were continually joining the ranks as others seceded, we contrived to retain on the acting staff, during what must be considered, for an amateur society, that long period, the majority of our most efficient original company. Having myself been playing once every ten days or fortnight, for five or six seasons prior to the foundation of this club, with some society or other, I had had quite a dozen years of the amusement, and, as may readily be supposed, the gilt had somewhat worn off the gingerbread, and I was not quite so red-hot to strut and fret my hour, as when the footlights and their surroundings were spick and span new. True, when opportunity offered for the repetition of an old part, I was as ready, nay, as eager as formerly to embrace it; or when—and which happened every now and again—a chance of performing some minor character with a professional company turned up, I rarely let the occasion slip, as it generally enabled me to pick up some hint in stage business hitherto undreamt of, or added by hook and by crook a treasured addition to my former experience. These bye performances introduced me to many stage celebrities, whose acquaintance, and in many instances, friendships I enjoyed in after life. But as to studying new characters for a single performance, without the probability of being called upon to repeat them, I am free to confess the enthusiasm had waned; and thus it came to pass that I was not an actor in,

but merely a co-conspirator of the harmless plot that culminated in the following ludicrous incident.

It must be borne in mind that these little episodes are no mere coinage of the imagination, but reminiscences of realities ; and as such I have not scrupled in every case to verify them with the names of the parties concerned.

Among my acquaintance in 1852, was one William Jenner, the proprietor of a small chemist's shop in Berwick-street, Soho. Jenner was a Sussex man, and had passed his early manhood in agricultural pursuits, his eldest brother being a farmer of some standing in that county. William, not being over bucolic in his tastes, resolved, when just turned thirty years of age, to throw aside the ploughshare, and no longer whistle o'er the Sussex lea; so, like Dick Whittington of old, he came up to the gay Metropolis, to seek his fortune in whatever might turn up, and promise opportunity for amassing the "siller." He ran against a Mr. Geeves, a plumber in a petty way of business in a turning out of the Haymarket, and these two worthies, neither of whom possessed much business aptitude, and still less inclination for any employ demanding industry, soon became sworn cronies. Whether it occurred to either, or to both of them, that the human frame and brick and mortar edifices might possibly be built on the same lines ; or, given that the conduit pipes of both assimilating, it was easy to repair them by the same workmen, I am unable to determine ; but the fact remains that soon after the cementing of these gentlemen's friendship, Jenner became installed as a chemist, and visited Geeves' clients in the capacity of under surveyor and foreman of the work, whenever the plumber had a job ; whilst Geeves repaid the civility by attending Jenner's suffering patients as his assistant, and advising as to the treatment of their intestinal canals. Geeves' little place of business, like most of the small plumbers' shops of the present day, was usually locked, and you had to ring the bell half-a-dozen times at least before anyone appeared in reply to the summons. The fact was, though Geeves' name figured as proprietor of the house on a brass plate on the entrance door, he merely rented, in addition to the shop and a small parlour at the back, a bed-

room on an upper floor, which a slatternly girl from a neighbouring coal-shed came every morning to "tidy up," as she expressed it, and to valet the street door during the few hours she was there, should anything so unlikely as a business call present itself for the plumber's attention.

At this time the Act of Parliament prohibiting persons keeping houses for betting purposes had not been introduced, and it was open to any adventurous spirit of indolent habits, with means sufficient to rent an "office" in a back street at ten shillings a week, and to purchase a desk, three or four cane-bottom chairs, and half-a-dozen penny printed lists of the horses' names in the race, to fasten on a black-board, and hang against the whitewashed bare walls of the apartment, for the perusal of shop assistants and boy clerks, of potmen and stable-lads, and similar classes, who systematically robbed their employers to furnish the means for their "investments;" it was competent for any scoundrel to start one of these little swindling hells; and it was the custom of Mr. Geeves, during the racing season, to pass his noondays in sauntering from one of these dens to another, inspecting the variation in the odds, and weighing in his mind the probable stability of each establishment, before depositing his half-crown with the proprietor on the animal of his choice, with a reasonable likelihood of receiving his gains should the horse happen to prove successful.

Jenner's shop, if you ignored two gouty, pear-shaped glass bottles, filled with some coloured liquid, that ornamented the front window, and a huge red and green lamp, with a crimson bull's-eye in the centre, that surmounted the doorway (and was strangely out of proportion with the words "Medical Hall," which appeared in lanky gold letters immediately beneath it), might as well have been called a hair-dresser's, a brush-maker's, or a petty perfumer's, as a doctor's shop, for its stock-in-trade put in equal claims to the usual plant of such depôts. It consisted of combs of all sorts—side, back, and front for ladies' tresses; white bone, black india-rubber, and imitation tortoiseshell for gentlemen's heads and beards, and small tooth abominations for eradicating superfluities from the fluffy noddles of neglected juveniles. Then came brushes, sufficient in number and

variety to polish up and keep in holiday condition the entire human frame. There were hair-brushes, whisker-brushes, tooth-brushes, nail-brushes, shaving-brushes, and "aurilaves" for the ears. There was soap—plain and scented, in cake and in bar; pomatum and brilliantine; hair-dye and whisker stain; tooth powder, hair powder, face powder (christened "violet" powder), and insect powder! Yes, the very cockroaches and black-beetles were not forgotten, and the extirpation of entomology from the face of creation was guaranteed for one and three half-pence, which included the Government stamp. Next came the plasters—corn, court, chest, and diachylum; the oils—hair, salad, lamp, and cod-liver; the ointments, the liniments, the ligaments, the peppermints, in drops or in liquid. Now we have the "ines"—saline, pepsine, quinine, iodine, florentine, gelatine, and glycerine,—vulgo, "ene," only the former sounds more euphonious; Epsom salts and smelling salts; senna and gum arabic. "Unique preparations" for the hair and moustache, and "specialities" for the teeth and gums. Specifics for neuralgia and tic-douloureux, and elixirs for headache, toothache, sideache, limbsache, and griping pains in the abdomen. Sponges, and oil-silk bags to contain them, are included in the catalogue, the latter manufactured of some adhesive material that sticks to your coat-tail with the heat of your pockets, and is consequently rendered useless long before your arrival home. Then we have feeding bottles, to supply maternal nourishment during the enforced absence of the parent, and "Fuller's earth," to render still more soft and delicate the infant's skin, when the little cherub is bedaubed with it from crown to sole by the doting mother on her return home. There were bandages also of softest linen for sprains, broken legs and arms, and deep and incised wounds; and twopenny papers of "prepared starch" wherein to steep and stiffen the aforesaid bandages, and render them fit substitutes for the discarded splint that had confined the fractured limb during days and nights of sleepless agony. Besides all these, Mr. Jenner dealt in what must be regarded as illegitimates, remembering that he professed himself a medical man. He had cigarettes in quarter of a hundred bundles

hidden in odd places, and a box or two of questionable foreign cheroots, slyly concealed behind an immense jar labelled "Camomile," in order to avoid the prying eye of the Inland Revenue officer, should that official seek to institute inquiries about "licensed for the sale of tobacco and snuff." At one side of the shop-door entrance stood a bundle of walking-sticks, varying in value, or, to speak by the card, in price, from twopence to a shilling; whilst on the opposite side figured a circular washing-tub, filled in the hot summer months with bottles of lemonade and "gingerpop," and surmounted by a lump of ice, to keep them cool, and entice a visit from the thirsty wayfarer. At the little side window on the left of the doorway some petty stationery was displayed; fancy tissue papers, cut in sundry tasteful devices for grate ornaments; packets of curl paper; a dozen steel pens sewn on a card, with a penholder and a bone paper-cutter above them, and marked "only 8d.," and, by its side, note and letter paper, in half and quarter quires, and sheets of "cream laid," four a penny. And—but this was an innovation—there had recently been discerned in the stationery window, as constituting a portion of the chemist's stock, a few small leather-covered pocket-books of oblong form, fastening at the end with a metal clasp, and bearing on one side, emblazoned in dazzling gold, the semblance of a race-horse at full gallop, his speed urged on by his jockey's vigorous use of whip and spur. These were no other than betting books, in a half-dozen of which Mr. Jenner had invested in a moment of Turf enthusiasm, consequent on his having drawn the winner in a shilling lottery of the Liverpool Grand National Steeplechase of the week before.

"From little causes great events arise,"

sang the poet, and but for the presence of these same betting books in the Doctor's shop window, it is open to question whether he would ever have been chronicled as the hero of the following story.

John Wells—"Tiny Wells"—as it was the fashion to call the celebrated jockey so many years associated with the Turf successes of the late Sir Joseph Hawley, and then

on the threshold of his fame, was one day walking up Berwick-street past the "Medical Hall," in company with his friend, "Jack Bilham."

And here may we be allowed to make a slight divergence from our tale, in favour of a little philosophy about Christian names? There are persons innumerable, both in public and private society, whose Christian and surnames appear inseparable under any circumstances, and are as much in unison with themselves as their boots or their underlinen; nor is this characteristic confined to any particular trade or profession, being as cosmopolitan as the blessed sun, that lights alike the Antipodes and the gallant Briton. Take the notabilities of the Bar. You speak of Edwin James, Douglas Straight, or Montague Williams, and the Edwin, the Douglas, and the Montague belong equally to, and are as much a part of these counsellors as are their wigs and gowns; whilst no one was ever heard to mention Ballantine except as "the learned serjeant;" to breathe Frederick, or Andrew, in connection with the name of Mr. Inderwick, Q.C., or to denounce the latest addition to the list of senior wranglers as anybody else than plain Mrs. Weldon. Even the music-hall programmes shunt the "Georgina," albeit that demi-masculine denomination would materially strengthen and lengthen the "star" line, and it and Mrs. W. seem, in common parlance, as far apart as the poles. To go lower in the social scale. There is Poole—the King of the tailors! Why, I question if anybody, except his family, and, perhaps, a few bosom chums, ever heard him mentioned as the gallant "Harry," while the marvellous steam machine, capable of splitting a Bank of England note in two, would be employed in vain to separate the "Dr. Collis" from the ordinary "Browne," of chlorodyne notoriety. The "Collis" stamps the individuality of the nostrum, and you would probably question the efficacy of Browne's mixture without the connecting link. Where would be the attraction of David James, or of Johnny Toole, without their Christian names in the playbill? It might be that some third-rate Merry Andrew, whose antics you were about to witness, was trading on these comedians' well-deserved reputation,

and announcing himself as Mr. J. or Mr. T. to mulct you out of your entrance money ; but, preceded by David, or John Laurence, you feel assured you have paid for the genuine article, and are as certain to receive full value for your outlay, as when you gleefully acknowledge the fact in Smith's crowded Oyster Rooms in the Strand an hour after the conclusion of the performance. Buckstone, Harley, Compton were never so distinguished in their day by the playgoing public, who ignored John, Pritt, and Harry, as superfluities ; nor are Bancroft, Kendal, and Hare spoken of in our time but as plain B., K., and H. ; but who, in this year of grace, would venture to extol the Juliet of Miss Anderson, without coupling with it the adjunctive " Mary," or eulogise the fascination of the Lyceum favourite, and omit the familiarity of " Ellen " with the Terry ? To solve this mystery is impossible—at least, as far as the present writer's ability goes—he can no more account for it than he can assign a reason for the flavour of a pine-apple, the scent of a rose, or the infliction of the School Board tax ; but the fact remains indisputable.

But to return to " Tiny Wells " and Jack Bilham. Bilham was a friend of the chemist, and essentially a horsey man. The reader must not understand by this that Jack sported trousers like a groom, so tight in the leg it seemed miraculous how he contrived to get his limbs into them ; that his boots had thick soles, laced up in the front, and yet shone with an unnatural bright polish on the sloppiest of days ; or that he eternally carried in his mouth a straw or a sprig of evergreen, as was the wont of the late revered Viscount Palmerston. No ! Mr. Bilham dressed and bore himself fairly *à la mode*, and there was not the slightest flavour of the stable in his manner or appearance. Far be it from me to infer that he was a blind, sycophantic adherent of Lindley Murray, or that an attentive ear might not now and then detect a jostling among the personal pronouns ; but what then ? Don't we often meet with bad English in fashionable novels, and *read* questionable French in the prospectus of native " professors," who boast their *purity of accent* as a reason (or an excuse, if you will) for their high *charges* ? There are sporting men—and of the better class,

too—who drift insensibly into the equine atmosphere. You can almost fancy yourself walking down a Mews when in their company, though the street should be Bond or Regent; but good-looking Jack was none of these, and yet you felt confident, before he opened his mouth, that the query he was about to propound to you would be connected with the Turf. Just as when, on a broiling hot summer day, you happen to saunter through a shady spinny, and become all of a sudden conscious of the presence of some adjacent cooling spring. You seem to scent its refreshing odour though you cannot see the stream, nor distinguish, midst the surrounding silence, its gentle, soothing ripple. Mr. Bilham and the young jockey paused at the chemist's shop; another moment, and they had entered it.

"Good morning, Doctor," said the former, extending his hand to the proprietor, who was behind the counter with an apron on, and the cuffs of his coat turned back. He was engaged in spreading a chest-plaster for an elderly, asthmatic-looking female, who patiently awaited its completion.

"Good morning, Mr. Bilham," rejoined the chemist, with ironical courtesy, as he grasped the proffered palm. "And what's the news?"

"Well," rejoined his friend, going direct to his favourite theme; "they take 100 to 7 kindly this morning about 'Lapidist' for 'The Guineas.' I am told it is a pretty good thing."

"Do they, though?" inquired the Doctor, mechanically, not having the vaguest notion of what "The Guineas" consisted.

"Tchu!" sneered the little jockey, with a contemptuous toss of his head. "I would not take 100 to 1 about *him*. We must see if we can't manage to look you up something better than that, Mr. Bilham."

"Who's your friend, Jack?" demanded the Doctor, evidently startled by what he regarded as the lad's audacity.

"What! don't you know 'Tiny Wells,' Bill?" remonstrated Jack, obviously disgusted with the chemist's ignorance.

Mr. Jenner bashfully confessed himself in the dark as to the boy's celebrity, but requested the honour of an introduction forthwith.

"Certainly!" exclaimed Mr. Bilham, emphatically, as if nothing short of a thumping legacy, paid down upon the nail, would have afforded him an equal amount of enjoyment. "This gentleman," he continued, addressing the lad and pointing to the chemist, who had now completed the plaster, "is my doctor, Tiny; and a damned good fellow you'll find him if ever you require physicking. This is young Wells, Bill, who rode 'Truth' for the 'Cambridge' last back end. It's a big thing, mind you, for a five stone thirteen jockey to win a handicap like that; and you mark what I tell you, before many seasons are over his head, Tiny will be bang at the top of the tree."

Mr. Jenner sincerely hoped Mr. Bilham's prophecy might be fulfilled, and that the lad would attain such lofty eminence; and declared himself willing at all times, as a friend of his friend Jack's, to afford Mr. Wells the benefit of his professional services on strictly ready-money terms.

"Let's have a look at those betting-books in the window, if you please, Doctor," said Tiny. "Mine is just full, and I may as well buy a new one of you for luck."

The chemist laid three or four of the evil tablets before the young jockey, who, having selected one, inquired the "damage."

"Humbug!" exclaimed Mr. Bilham, by way of adjusting the price. "Put it in your pocket, Tiny. The Doctor wouldn't think of charging *you* for a bit of a thing like that. You can make it up to him a hundredfold."

"Of course I will," said Tiny, as he pocketed the volume. "Still, Mr. Bilham, I should not like, as the Doctor is nearly a stranger, to—"

"Shut up!" interposed Mr. Bilham. "The Doctor knows well enough you are too much of a gentleman to allow him to be done. "Don't you, Bill?"

"Bill" did. He was certain that if Mr. Wells was in the secret of any good thing on which he could safely invest a half-sovereign, he would not fail to confide it to him "on the quiet;" and Mr. Wells, on his part, could not remember

anything that would afford him such deep gratification, as to journey several miles out of his way, in order to impart to his new-made friend the coveted intelligence.

Jenner's success in the steeplechase lottery had given him a taste for Turf speculation. Like the lion whelp, he had tasted blood, and his palate was whetted for a feast; he was pining for young Wells's "tip."

As already hinted, our hero was no strong advocate for laborious work; indeed, truth to tell, he was little averse to a trifling amusement during business hours; and in the small, ill-lit parlour at the rear of his shop, quiet card parties were frequently held, as early in the evening as the gas could be lighted with any show of decency, at which his partner the plumber (Mr. Geeves), Mr. Bilham, and other acquaintance of idle or sporting tendency, assisted. The game was always speculative—usually loo—and though the stakes contended for were trivial, regarded from a gambling point of view, they were still sufficiently heavy to make the holding of bad cards a consideration to the Doctor, whose ways and means were "cabined, cribbed, confined." Wells, who had now become a constant visitor at "Medical Hall," had introduced to that sanctum his young friend, the subsequent unrivalled horseman, George Fordham, who was suffering from some ailment that required professional advice; and these two youths, then both in their teens, had been brought to regard Jenner as a first-class practitioner, and to place equal reliance on his "advice gratis" and his half-crown boxes of bolus, as though he had been senior sawbones at a metropolitan hospital, or the most fashionable physician in Brook-street, Grosvenor-square. Had the "Tiny" one caught a severe cold, through omitting to change his silk jacket on the instant of dismounting, when drenched to the skin by an April hail-storm at the recent Epsom Spring Meeting; or had little Fordham—the "Demon," as he was then called by his followers and the racing public—bruised his leg severely, by cannoning against a brother jockey, who refused to clear the way for him as he brought his horse up with a fearless rush to the front, the Berwick-street chemist was the oracle to be consulted, and from his Apothecaries' Hall came the throat gargle, or

lotion for the injured limb, destined to set these young dare-devils on their legs again, and restore them to pristine health in time for the next sporting carnival.

Around fashionable celebrities of every art or profession are ever gathered satellites, sycophants, and hangers-on. To be seen walking across Lincoln's-inn, or down Chancery-lane, in company with a gentleman wearing a seedy black cloth gown and a dirty white horse-hair wig, and carrying under his arm a bundle of papers tied round with a piece of red tape, is regarded by one man as a mark of honourable distinction. Another would give an inch off the end of his well-waxed William Holland moustache, only to be pointed out by a passer-by to his friend, as being "the very gentleman he had noticed talking to Mr. Henry Irving in Covent Garden Market the other day," and wondering what notable he could possibly be. The fact is, the double-faced Janus had intruded himself on the fashionable tragedian, to inquire if he would kindly direct him the shortest cut to the Lyceum Theatre, merely for the sake of vaunting his importance to his wife and eldest boy over the evening dinner-table, and declaring what a long and interesting conversation he had held that morning with the amiable and distinguished actor. A third parasite of celebrities would submit resignedly to the ailment demanding medical advice, nor begrudge the two guineas introductory fee he paid for it (the universal *douceur*, by the way, amongst physicians of note *used* to be one pound one, but we must charitably assume we have extra value for the additional coin) that he might be able to assure the friend who congratulated him on his perfect recovery to health, that a more plain-spoken, worthy, kind-hearted fellow, although Physician in Ordinary to the Court, and consulted by half the crowned heads of Europe, than Sir Timothy Ticklepalm, Bart., F.R.S., F.S.A., F.L.S., &c., &c., &c. ; a more affable, anti-humbug man he *never* had the pleasure of counting amongst his most intimate chums. And if this be the case—and who will be bold enough to gainsay it?—where only one's vanity or *amour propre* is concerned, what may not be urged in favour of an acquaintance with a notability whose advice may possibly tend to the

augmentation of your banking account? To be acquainted with a fashionable light-weight jockey, whose services are in request, and whose society is sought after by half the wealthy owners of racehorses in the kingdom; and who, from his very surroundings, is bound every now and then to be in the possession of a stable secret for some profitable investment! To be in the confidence of such a person! To be able to say to him, with the same freedom as you would ring your library bell, and desire the housemaid to wipe up the ink you had spilt over your writing-desk, "Jack," or "George," as the case might be, "shall I put my fiver on 'Catch-em-alive' *now*, or wait till the week after next, when the stable money is on?" Is this, I should like to know, a friend or an advantage to be despised? With the fidelity of the Hibernian echo, I unhesitatingly answer "No!" Well, then, how can you wonder, reader, that the constant presence of "Tiny" Wells, George Fordham, and other turfites of lesser note at "Medical Hall," brought with it a concomitant assemblage of third and fourth-rate sporting men. There were the "Colonel," the "Major," the "Captain," and other officers of a mythical army, and a host of other persons whose real names were sealed books to everybody but themselves. There were "little Bobby," "old Fred," "Sandy Charley," and sundry hangers-on to the jockeys' coat tails, lounging round the chemist's shop of a morning, awaiting the arrival of the lions of the day. Each and all had "something good" to impart to "the Doctor"; something that had not up to now even reached the cornucopian ears of "Tiny" or his friend George; some horse for the Derby or Ascot Stakes, whose success must infallibly prove an "open sesame" to a hitherto unexplored gold mine! Jenner unhappily lent a ready ear to the siren's song, and loss upon loss was the result. The few pounds he had garnered up through the jockey's information went back, with compound interest, by following the "certainties" of the outsiders; and these losses, added to those of bad hands at cards, and the consequent gradual dwindling of his stock in trade, caused the doctor's boots to be worn till the soles had become thin, the collars and shirt cuffs ragged past resuscitation by extra starching, and the elbows and lapels

of the long-used frock coat lamentably in need of the patent "reviver." Alas ! the truth must be told, the Doctor was hard up, and the question now was, what could be done to replenish the attenuated exchequer ?



CHAPTER VII.

Bills and I.O.U's—The Promissory Note Renewed—Benefit at Soho Theatre—*Romeo and Juliet*—The Beneficiare appears as the Apothecary of Mantua—A "Surprise" for Romeo—Unique Apology for Stage Absence—Conclusion.

WHAT is it that first presents itself to the impecunious mind on every occasion of difficulty, as a stop-gap to a gnawing appetite, and the *chevaux-de-frise* to the broker's man? This is not a conundrum, but a very serious inquiry with many a man in his journey from the cradle to the cemetery. The answer is a bill stamp, or that legal document's younger brother, the seductive I. O. U. These three liquid vowels have been the impassive cause of more mischief among the world's inhabitants than the cannon, the spear, and the sword. Not seldom are they responsible for the husband's penury, the wife's tears, the dissipated heirloom of the orphan. The thief may often trace his crime and subsequent prison life to their duplicity, when he first courted their aid to strengthen his extravagance; and the gambler curse, with his dying breath, the readiness their presence gave him for the indulgence of his darling passion. And yet they seem so simple in themselves; wear such an innocent air; are so guileless, and, moreover, so *very* easy of formation. A stroke of the goosequill and it is done! The empty larder is replenished, the hitherto implacable landlord retires benignly, and the bum bailiff gets kicked out! Alas! my impulsive and confiding friend, the bill stamp and the I. O. U. may be present panaceas for all the ills of humanity, but be sure, when the day of reckoning arrives, they will be found the Pandora's box of credit.

Well, a "kite" for twenty-five pounds was flown, the obliging alchemist describing it as a "pony," and the chemist and the plumber were again in funds. The cards were shuffled as of yore, and the half-crown or half-sovereign was once more invested on the "good thing." But somehow Fortune resolutely refused her smiles to the doctor. Though he should hold a hand of kings, queens, and tens, the ace was sure to be out somewhere *that* deal to guillotine his monarch, and the knave close at hand to upset his confidence in the ten of trumps. Then the "long shot" outsider he relied on to land him a lump for the Goodwood Stakes, somehow pulled up dead lame on the morning of his final gallop, and had to be scratched at the last moment by his owner; and the favourite that "could not lose" the Cup on Thursday, and was bound to more than recoup his Tuesday's losses, got done on the post a short head, by an animal that figured in the quotations when the flag fell at 100 to 5.

Bills, Promissory notes, and I.O.U.'s are as sure to fall due at the given time as the sun is to rise, the moon to have a first quarter, and the collector to call for the Queen's taxes. There is no pushing them back, as you serve the hands of the hall dial when you come home late for dinner, and wish to humbug your wife you were in to the tick. The two months and three days' grace are things of the past, and the order to stand and deliver is before you. "Attention! down with the 'Corianders,' Mr. Acceptor, you are no longer allowed to stand at ease."

Now that the crisis had come, Mr. Jenner, as a matter of course, was unprepared; the time had flown so quickly, he could hardly persuade himself that the bill had really become due; business with the plumber was unusually slack; in short, Mr. Geeves could hardly remember it having been so bad for years. The visits of the Colonel and the Captain to the apothecary's shop were less frequent than formerly, and as for George Fordham and the "Tiny" one, the race meetings were now general all over the country, and jockeys must be away from town fulfilling their engagements. The hangers-on to their skirts had dwindled down to a miserable few; those among them who

could raise sufficient means to defray the railway fare by "Parley" to the racing fixture, had followed in the wake of the sporting world, in the hope of picking up their precarious livelihood, and Jenner, Geeves, and good "Jack Bilham" were nearly deserted by their acquaintance. However, the last-named, who, to quote the eulogy of his friends, was always a "trump," generously came to the front, and lent the chemist the wherewithal to renew the promissory note, and thus saved him from the durance vile which, at the time of our story, was the alternative between payment and the reverse.

"But," said Mr. Bilham, after the acceptance had been renewed, and everything rendered velvety for the next two months, "remember, Doctor, you must arrange to take up the 'kite' when the time comes round. It is of no use keeping on paying sixty per cent. to old Martin for the rest of your life; so you had better scrape the stuff together and get shot of the damned thing."

To "scrape the stuff together" is, no doubt, capital advice; the difficulty is to find the tools and procure the scavenger; but Jenner saw the necessity of providing the "fantails," and resolved to set about it at once.

"I say, Cowper," he said to me, when we met in the Strand one day, "do you know, I am in a devil of a fix?"

The Doctor, familiar as we were, generally addressed me by my theatrical name. He never "Bill'd" me in his life, as he used to "Jack" Mr. Bilham, and "Tommy" his partner the plumber.

"Indeed!" I replied, composedly; "that's not a first appearance with you, Jenner. But what is the new *rôle* you complain of?"

"I've been stupid enough," he continued, "to put my name to a——"

"What's the amount?" I interposed, anticipating the cause of the "fix."

"Five-and-twenty pounds," he rejoined; "and how the deuce I am to raise it I'm sure I don't know."

"And I'm sure I don't know," I replied. "It is no use your looking at me, old man; for you couldn't extract half that sum from all my worldly possessions with a lever that would lift St. Paul's."

"I know that well enough," said the Doctor. "You spend every halfpenny you get in your stage craze. By the way, Cowper, that reminds me. Your club is always playing for some charity or other; couldn't you manage to get me up a benefit at some little theatre? I could get rid of no end of tickets."

By "your club," you understand the sly dog of course alluded to the Scenic, but he fancied he might as well soft-sawder me a bit, as King Pippin of the apple basket, and hence the intended compliment.

"I will see what can be done, Doctor," I said, "and let you know in a day or so," and we shook hands and parted.

Amongst my particular theatrical cronies at this time, I reckoned the late lessee of the Leicester Theatre Royal, Mr. E. Clinton Hall, father of the present Stafford Hall, the rising young scenic artist, whose work, especially in last year's pantomime at Mr. Wilson Barrett's magnificent Leeds Theatre, gained significant notice from the local Press. To this gentleman I imparted the chemist's proposal, and, with that impulsive and fun-loving humour so characteristic of his Hibernian nature, he at once caught at the idea of a performance in which the doctor could sustain a character. We ran over the names of a dozen plays in which the company of the Scenic Club were studied, so that the entertainment could be brought off forthwith. At last he said—

"Has the club ever done *Romeo and Juliet*, Bill?"

"Never," I replied. "It is a very heavy piece, and——"

"I know," he interrupted. "Mr. Cowper does not care much about *Romeo*. You like something with more guts in it, eh, Bill?"

Don't be squeamish, Madam, if you please. I am perfectly *en règle*. Remember, we are talking "shop," and "guts" is orthodox theatrical jargon for a strong part.

I confessed myself not over head and ears in love with the "romantic young Corydon," as Beauseant dubs Claude Melnotte, and inquired how he came to suggest so sombre a tragedy.

"Why," he replied, bursting into a roar of laughter,

"haven't we got a ready-made apothecary in the beneficiare? Jenner is half-starved and thin enough, God knows; his poverty will consent to anything, so there's the text illustrated; and as to his will, *that* is quite of a mind with his poverty, so long as you can show him a sovereign or so hanging to it. *Romeo and Juliet* is the play against the world, and I'll do the Friar and give Juliet her sleeping draught."

"And what about Mr. Cowper?" I inquired. "Is that poor fellow to be left out in the cold, and you have all the fun to yourself?"

"Oh, you can stand down for once, Mr. Tragedy; or if you really want a 'go in,' take a selection from the Prince of Denmark, and give a taste of your quality to the half-price."

All was arranged before we separated, and I undertook to acquaint the Doctor with his good fortune on the following day.

Mr. Jenner received the communication that a benefit would be got up for him, on the absolute condition that he appeared on the stage as the Apothecary in *Romeo and Juliet*, with no trifling embarrassment, not to say positive alarm. His taste ran little in the theatrical groove; whilst as to acting himself, he had no more notion of the art than an itinerant German band entertains of time or harmony. I, however, assured him, in the words of Hamlet, that it was "as easy as lying," whereupon he seemed more reconciled to the donning of the sock, and fancied, in *that* case, he should be able to acquit himself with tolerable efficiency. I promised to give him all necessary instruction, and to put the matter in hand without further delay.

When Mr. Hall and I, as committee men of the club, propounded the scheme at the next general meeting, we were met with unwonted opposition. Some were averse to the tragedy in itself; others opposed to the introduction of a stranger, and that stranger, moreover, a perfect novice, to take part in a performance; whilst a third clique entertained lofty objections to the services of so distinguished a body as the Scenic Club being accorded for the advantage of an obscure individual. We, however, managed ultimately to

override these scruples, so as to gain consent to utilize the name of the club in the play-bills and advertisements, though at the cost of several members, who declared the concession *infra dig.*, and seceded in consequence at the end of the season.

The Doctor's connections have been sufficiently indicated to make the assumption clear, that the male portion of the "benefit" audience would not materially affect the engagements of the *crème de la crème* of society; and it would be doing a positive injustice to the memory of those ladies who have long years ago retired from the cares and strifes of this life, to claim for them any distinctive advantage over their brethren. To be candid, the chemist's *clientelle* had little in sympathy with the "upper ten" of either sex. Berwick-street and neighbourhood have never been distinguished for wealth and fashion, the inhabitants being for the most part of a motley kind; petty shopkeepers, with here and there a dilapidated lodging-house, scantily provided with more than seedy furniture, intended for "gentlemen only;" or, as the simpler-minded landlord ingenuously puts it, "Beds to let for single men;" whilst the flaunting young damsels of the *demi-monde* who appropriate the Soho district to themselves, constituted a very large, not to say by far the more considerable portion of Mr. Jenner's feminine connection. It was to the patronage of these classes the doctor principally appealed, and upwards of three hundred admissions were disposed of by him long before the date of the interesting event, which was announced to take place at the Royal Soho, now the Royalty Theatre, and where, in addition to the valuable services of the Scenic Club in Shakespeare's tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, the benefiariæ would exhibit his meagre anatomy as the apothecary of Mantua, being "positively his first and only appearance on any stage."

That the whole performance would be a spree was apparent from the first, and the merry Clinton Hall hit upon a notion that, if put in practice, would render the Doctor's benefit a memorable night to all who witnessed it. It was no other than to provide a board, technically known as a "pantomime flap," the width of the door of the apothecary.

cary's house which forms portion of the "Street in Mantua," the opening scene of the fifth act. This fascia, painted on one side the same colour as the house, and not distinguishable from it, was to be firmly fixed over the door; on its reverse side were to figure in black Roman characters, half-a-dozen inches long—

W. JENNER,

CHEMIST.

and as soon as the starved apothecary made his appearance at the door, in reply to Romeo's summons, the flap was to be turned over by pulling a cord fastened behind the scene, and thus exhibit his name and business immediately over his head. The wickedness of the thing and the fun it promised tickled me, and on the instant I gave in my faithful adherence to the "sell." The secret was to be confined inviolably to our two selves, lest any unforeseen circumstance should crop up to defeat, and

"Shake our fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it."

Furthermore, it was arranged that we should visit the costumier in company, and select a dress for the apothecary, grotesque in style and cut, and anything but sombre in colour; and on the night of performance we three worthies were to occupy a little dressing-room by ourselves, so that we might assure the Doctor his nerves should not be unstrung by the chaff of strangers, or himself exposed to any of those practical jokes frequently indulged in towards novices, and débutants in particular; but this isolation was really to keep him out of sight of Romeo and the rest till the last moment, and so prevent the collapse of the wily scheme. All was laid down as systematically as a clerk in the first six months of his articles would proceed, if entrusted with the survey of a water-butt, and we awaited the arrival of the night with the hope and impatience of a prodigal son on the eve of his coming of age.

For more than a fortnight I daily acted the tutor, and gave the proprietor of "Medical Hall" instructions as to

the delivery of the text, and advice how to deport himself in face of the cordial reception that was certain to greet him.

"Directly you hear the shout of applause," said I, "stand perfectly still in the doorway; put your right hand on your heart, and bow again and again till they leave off clapping. Take plenty of time before you say, 'Who calls so loud?' and when Mr. Whitford says, 'Come hither, man,' advance towards him a couple of steps and stop. His next words are, 'I see that thou art poor.' Here you must shake your head slowly, from side to side, in this manner; stand quite still during his speech, and after you have said, 'My poverty, but not my will, consents,' exit through the door into your shop, looking cautiously around as you go. I will be at the door to give you the draught before you re-enter; and when you hand it to Romeo, shake the bottle, and hold it up to the light to see if the sediment mixes, just the same as you would do with a mixture at home. When he gives you the purse, press it fervently between both hands, so, and lift them upwards, with a trembling shake, in this way; keep your eyes constantly fixed on your hands, as if thinking of nothing but the money, till the words—

'Farewell; buy food, and get thyself in flesh,'

then go out the same way as before, only with less caution and quicker. Now, if you remember to follow this out, you'll do it as well as if you had been on the stage all your life."

Over and over again did the chemist rehearse his task, with me as his Romeo, in the little dark parlour at the back of the shop, and go through his instructions, except as to shaking the phial, which he always objected to as silly and unnecessary for *him*.

The evening's entertainments were to commence with the tragedy, and conclude with the "Closet Scene" from *Hamlet*; and, by way of interlude, a solo on the violin was to be executed by a Dr. Hall—to quote the language of the playbill, "A professional friend of the beneficiary," and, in truth, Jenner's chum sawbones, and proprietor of a twin-brother "Medical Hall" in Poland-street, Oxford-street.

The eventful night arrived. All was now in apple-pie order; the theatre was crammed to its utmost capacity, and the Doctor's friends and patrons, male and female, were conspicuous in little gossiping groups from floor to ceiling all over the house. The overture had been played, the green-baize curtain rung up, and the tragedy was on. Sampson had bit his thumb at the partisans of the opposite faction, as he has nibbled that picker and stealer any time for the last three centuries on every stage in Great Britain; and Gregory, in obedience to his fellow-servant's instructions, had unsheathed his bit of cold steel, and stood ready and impatient to deliver his "swashing blow." The love-sick Romeo had encountered the lovely Juliet at old Squire Capulet's ball masqué, and, as a matter of course, fallen over head and ears in love with her at first sight; and Juliet, on her part, had reciprocated the "spooning," and vowed, as the majority of young ladies at her age are in the habit of doing, that if she were not permitted to have Mr. Montague as a hubby, she should forthwith set about exchanging her neat little half-tester bedstead in the governor's palatial town residence, for a cold damp bed of loam, or it might even be of sticky clay, up to your knees in slush in the winter months, five feet six long, by a bare yard in width, in the suburban Veronese cemetery. The fiery Tybalt had sent the jesting Mercutio to his last account, and Romeo, in avenging the murder of his dear friend, had dispatched the "Good King of Cats," as that dear friend irreverently dubbed the furious one, in his wake, by a single thrust of his "warranted real Damascus steel" blade. As a fitting consequence of his crime, the Royal Prince of Verona, to whom you have not previously had the honour of an introduction, had banished the boy-lover from his kingdom, who, only three short hours before, as his heart-broken wife informs the pit and stalls, had entered into the holy bonds of wedlock; whilst Juliet had received from the hands of Mr. Clinton Hall, in his capacity of Friar Laurence, the small phial labelled "poison," in pursuance of the Act of Parliament, but in reality containing the "distilled liquor" the lady was directed to swallow, in order

to deceive her parents, and induce the two-and-forty hours' snooze she was to undergo, before awakening to life and happiness, as lively as a kitten, and, like humped-backed Dick the Third, thoroughly herself again. All this had been effectively gone through, with the tiresome garrulity of the old nurse thrown in; but alas! the son and heir to the Montague estates had just had his cup of happiness upset, while in the very act of lifting it to his lips, by the faithful Balshazar's information—he had travelled "express" all the way from Verona with the news—that his dearly-beloved young bride had suddenly kicked the bucket, and that he himself had witnessed the entombment of her remains in Capel's monument, attended with all the pomp and ceremony befitting so solemn an occasion.

It was now all U. P. with the heart-stricken Romeo; nothing remained for him but to die. But how best to effect the consummation so devoutly to be wished? "Ay, there's the rub!" as What's-his-name says in the play. In the midst of the poor man's grief he had his wits about him, which is more than can be said for most young men of the present day—but that's neither here nor there. Suddenly he remembered having noticed a chemist's and druggist's depôt somewhere thereabouts, where possibly he could purchase a small quantity of elixir for disappointed love. By the bye, there was the very shop! Yes, though almost a disciple of the Mantua Sir Wilfrid Lawson up to now, he would, on this particular occasion, go in for the bottle!

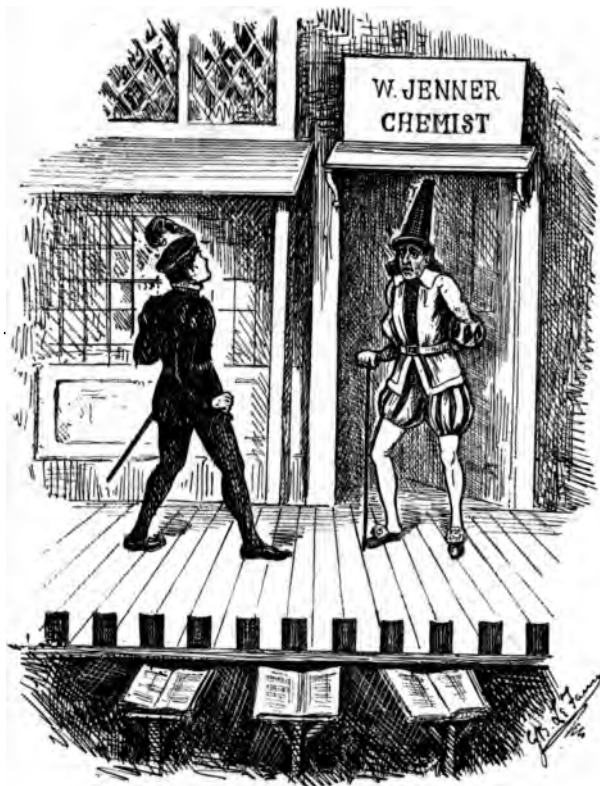
"What ho, apothecary!" exclaimed Mr. Whitford, dealing Jenner's frail street-door a determined rat, tat, tat, with his knuckles.

The time had come. Clinton Hall stood at my side, his right arm resting against the scene, with the cord of the pantomime flap clutched tightly between thumb and forefinger.

"Now mind, Doctor," said I, as the unconscious victim prepared to answer the door, "take your time; and, whatever you do, don't attempt to speak till they've quite done applauding."

"All right, Cowper; I know. Open the door."





A "Surprise" for Romeo.

"Be steady," said I, as a last caution. "Go," and open went the door with a fling.

He had his right foot over the ledge of the scene, and was in the act of stepping over it with his left, when a genuine shout of applause and recognition greeted him. He was known—if not personally, at least by sight—to quite half the audience, and his quaint appearance, in a guise so distinct from his habitual black frock coat and trousers, caused general merriment. Romeo, as is the recognised courtesy of the stage on the entrance of the hero of the night, remained passive until such time as the applause should subside, and was now turning towards Jenner as the latter uttered his first words, "Who calls so loud?"

"Now's your time, Ned," I exclaimed, "over with it;" and over in truth it went.

The click of the flap, as it struck against the scene, caused poor Romeo to raise his eyes; he started back a step in amazement, and stood as if paralysed, mentally exclaiming with Macbeth when he first catches sight of the murdered Banquo's apparition, "Which of you have done this?"

To describe the scene that followed is altogether beyond my goose-quill. As the newspaper reporters say, in speaking of a destructive fire, or when relating the details of a sad mine explosion or fearful railway accident, "it can be much easier imagined than described." The roars of laughter, the screams of delight, and the running fire of chaff, mingled with a storm of hisses from that part of the audience who looked on the trick as a disgusting irreverence, and had paid their money for legitimate amusement, made such a Babel of noises that to speak through the din was impossible. The Doctor could not understand the row, and bowed his head again and again, like a Mandarin figure in a grocer's shop. Romeo's fear was lest he should turn round and see the board, in which case there was infallibly an end of the scene, if not of the play. Eventually comparative silence was restored, and Mr. Jenner made the apothecary's usual inquiry, "Who calls so loud?" "Why, W. Jenner, chemist, of course," shouted a stentorian voice from the back of the gallery, and again was the uproar

renewed. The half-frenzied Romeo looked imploringly at the house, as much as to say, "Pray, ladies and gentlemen, let me ask him for a dram of poison." In another few seconds he had made this request, offering the shop-keeper his purse and contents in settlement. The latter, who, it seems, did not require payment of his goods before delivery, simply shook his head negatively, and re-entered his caboose to prepare the mixture. He was back again on the stage in an instant, phial in hand, and gave it the regular professional shake, amidst renewed roars of laughter, before confiding it to the intending suicide. Romeo now handed him his golden reward, with the philosophic lecture about the evil tendency of the circulating medium which, in Mr. Montague Junior's case, always accompanies the gift; and the Doctor, having clasped the treasure between both hands in the approved fashion, as instructed, was about to go indoors and count the "dibbs." In passing through the doorway, which was rather of a low pitch, he—being very tall—struck his sugar-loaf-shaped hat against the top; when off his head it rolled into the Mantua street, stopping within a yard of the unhappy Romeo's feet. He stooped to pick up the headgear, which act produced another yell, and added not a little to the poor fellow's confusion. The apothecary's exit concludes the scene, and some sort of attention was given to the remainder of the play; but yet another fiasco was in store for the poor beneficiare.

"A letter for you, Dr. Jenner," said the call-boy, when the door of our dressing-room had been opened in answer to that small functionary's knock. "A man just left it at the stage-door, and said you was to have it directly."

"A letter for me!" said the Doctor in surprise. "I wonder what the deuce it's about."

He tore open the envelope and read—

"MY DEAR JENNER,—I much regret I shall be unable to play the violin to-night. The fact is, I feel so nervous now the time is at hand, that I must positively ask your forgiveness for my absence. Wishing you every success, and hoping it will cause no inconvenience,

"Yours most truly,

"WALTER HALL."

"What the devil's to be done now, Cowper?" said the Doctor to me as I was drawing on my sable silk tights, preparatory to donning the jet bugled tunic of the Prince of Denmark.

"Why, if we can't have Hall, we must do without him," I replied, with the least possible concern at the misfortune. "All that can be done, is for you to go on and make an apology."

"What! I go on! impossible!" he exclaimed, "I should not know what to say."

"Oh, it is easy enough. Tell them you very much regret to be obliged to ask their indulgence for the omission of the violin solo by your esteemed friend, Dr. Hall, who has been unfortunately called out professionally, as it was your earnest wish to carry out strictly the programme of the night, but that——"

"Stop, stop, stop," said the Doctor, "I could not recollect half of that, I should make a rare mess of it. You go on and say something, there's a good fellow."

"Not I! old man," I exclaimed, pointing to my half-nude condition. "Besides, it would never do for me to be seen till I go on in the 'Closet Scene.' You will manage it right enough. I will prompt you at the wing."

Clinton Hall could not be persuaded to apologize for the absence of his namesake. He probably foresaw some more fun in the Doctor's appearance before the footlights; and as I continued obdurate to Mr. Jenner's oft-repeated entreaties, he was forced, will he, nill he, to quote the gravedigger's rhetoric, to rely on himself in his extremity.

The prompter pulled aside the green curtain to allow the Mantua apothecary—for the doctor was still in his stage habiliments—to pass in front of it, when he was again received with jeers and laughter, though nothing in comparison with his first reception, for a considerable portion of the audience had left, probably thinking they had received fully sufficient value for their money, and (poor benighted creatures!) indifferent to the treat in store for them in the "Closet Scene." However, there were quite enough left to thoroughly enjoy the concluding incident.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the doctor began.

"Take off your sugar-loaf, old chap," from several voices in chorus, for the chemist had forgotten to remove his grotesque headgear.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he repeated, somewhat abashed, and growing every moment more nervous and confused. "My friend's name, Dr. Hall, is down in the playbill to play a tune on the fiddle."

"Hear, hear!" and ironical cheers, as the reporters say in St. Stephen's-square.

"But I am very sorry to tell you," he went on, "it is impossible he can be here to-night."

"Why not?" demanded a gruff voice from the pit, in a manner that inferred he was not to be trifled with, and would be content with nothing short of the advertised entertainment.

"Well, to tell you the truth, *Sir*," answered the Doctor, taken off his guard, and in a thoroughly conventional tone, "he has been suddenly called out to a case of——"

Here he paused, uncertain whether to leave the apology where it stood, or if it were incumbent on him to state the nature of the summons.

"What case?" shouted the same powerful voice from the pit.

"A case of midwifery," I whispered to him from the wing, not for an instant suspecting, or daring to hope he would stand the joke. He turned his face to the curtain where mine was peeping through, as if to seek confirmation of the suggestion. With a look of imperturbable gravity, and assuming the most earnest tone at my command, I nodded an emphatic affirmative, and a rapid, "Yes, yes, yes, certainly."

He had taken the bait.

"A case of midwifery, ladies and gentlemen."

"Where?" demanded his original questioner, in a tone of thunder, and determined to have it all out.

The Doctor again turned his face towards the opening in the curtain for instruction, and the same serious countenance and stolid business look met his gaze.

"Tell them," I hissed out under my breath. "Give *them* some name and address, or they won't stand it."

"Where?" once more demanded the waggish voice in the pit, as he noticed the chemist's hesitation.

"Mrs. Spinks, the pork butcher's wife in Little Newport-street," said the doctor, timidly. "She was confined this evening about half-past eight of a boy."

The "Closet Scene" of *Hamlet* had poor attraction for the few remaining of the audience who patronised Mr. Jenner's benefit night, and but little more for the wearer of the sables. I hurried through it as rapidly as possible, anxious to leave the theatre and join my companions at Mr. Caldwell's tavern, the "Crown and Two Chairmen" opposite, where a boiled leg of mutton and trimmings had been ordered for half-past eleven o'clock, for a dozen or more of those who had been engaged over the way. We did not separate till far into the morrow's daylight, and over cheerful pipe and oft-replenished glass, many were the tales recounted of past performances, and of the triumphs and mishaps of the SCENIC CLUB.



CONCLUSION.

AND now, kind reader, that we are about to separate, confide the truth to me in a gentle whisper. Tell me, have you been bored with these old-fashioned tales, and wished them habited in more modern garb; or have they lightened and amused your leisure hours, and caused you to reciprocate my hearty desire that we may meet again? Time has despoiled my once raven locks, aye, and reaped them, too, with no niggard sickle, so that there may remain little in unison between us on that score; but human Nature is human Nature in her decline, as in her heyday; and the joyous, boisterous roar of youth finds a mild and cheerful echo, albeit mellowed by distance of Time, in the jolly chuckle of vigorous age, rendered radiant by the remembrance of the distant past. At this lapse of years I can gleefully re-enter and enjoy the mirth-moving scenes I have endeavoured to describe; again, in fancy, assume the tone and attitude of the patriot Damon, when hastily summoned by the call-boy to the footlights, and compelled to leave to the Strand Theatre tortoiseshell cat the half-consumed mutton chop. Once more, with the quick, lynx eye of early manhood, I detect the widowed Hermione's ringlets, as yet hidden by her classic robe, and now ruthlessly dragged from their concealment by little Miss Mandlebert, and held up to a laughing crowd by the innocent child. The spleen and disappointment of the expectant Hamlet, when forced to resign the trappings and the "suits of woe" in favour of the white and silver wedding dress of fair Portia's bridegroom, seem to revive and burn anew at the remembrance of the wrong inflicted on the aspiring young tragedian; and the pantomime flap over the apothecary's shop door, with

"W. Jenner, Chemist," painted on it, is as plainly visible to my eyes at this moment as on the eventful evening of the Doctor's benefit. If you, dear Sir, or Madam, who have been beguiled into looking in the peep-show, have in any way shared in the fun of the puppets, let me indulge the hope that you will, at no distant time, be pleased to renew your acquaintance with him who pulled the string, and who now most respectfully bids you, not farewell, but "*au revoir*."











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